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C. $32.50
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D. $50
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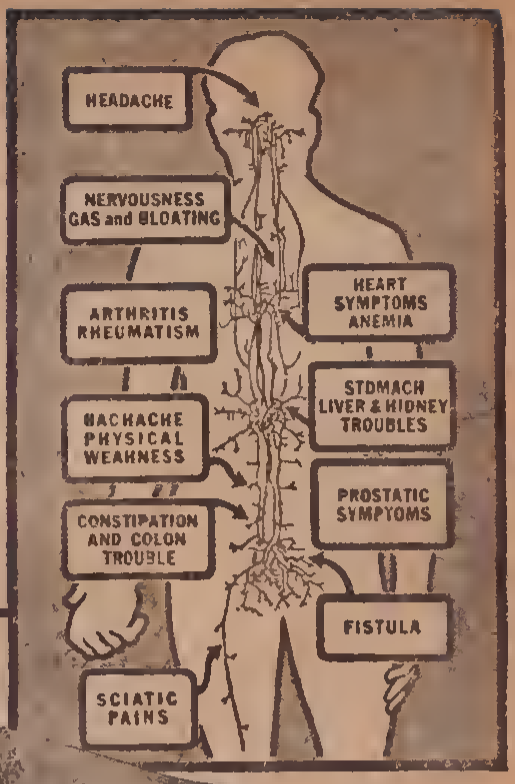

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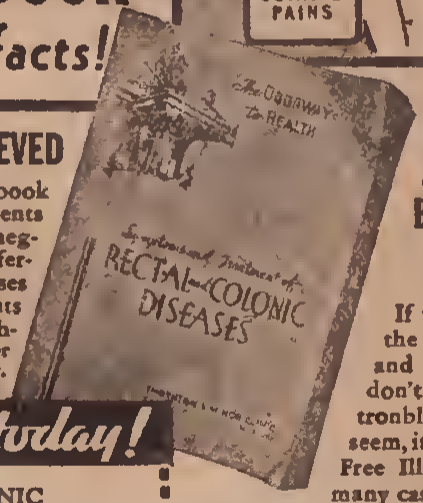

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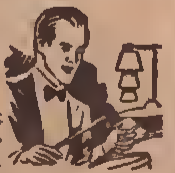

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(Complimentary sample issues of fan journals listed here are available to readers. When requesting your specimen copy, please enclose a three-cent stamp to cover postage. Address your requests to the individual fan-mag. editors, and please mention STARTLING STORIES.—Ed.)

SPACEWAYS. 303 Bryan Place, Hagerstown, Maryland. Edited by James Avery and Harry Warner, Jr.

British author Eric Frank Russell's feature piece on Charles Fort in eighth issue of this fan gazette worth looking over. Among the brighter features included in current number is Larry B. Farsaci's informative department, "Looking Backward," which pole-vaults reader into the fantasy of yesteryear, with comment anent masterpieces of the days gone by. "Stardust," by "The Star-Treader" is a scintillating bit of business on sidelights of science fiction. All in all, a smooth job.

• • •

COSMIC TALES. 170 Washington Avenue, West Haven, Conn. Edited by Louis Kuslan and Gertrude Kuslan.

Fiction from fans is platform of this neatly mimeographed sheet. Second Anniversary Issue, in our hands, packs forty-two pages, with table of contents including Dr David H. Keller, J. Harvey Haggard, Jack Speer, John Giunta, and other fans. If you've got a short piece of science fiction worth seeing print, try it on the editors of this book. (New ed is John Giunta.)

• • •

MIKROS. Edited by Russ Hodgkins. 1903 West 84th Place, Los Angeles, Calif.

Lively comment on allied phases of science fiction in latest bulletin. Russ Hodgkins gets up an interesting dish of informality in this, with contribs by T. Bruce Yerke, Doc Lowndes, himself, and other luminaries. This rates a once-over.

• • •

VOICE OF THE IMAGI-NATION. Box 6475 Met Station, Los Angeles, Calif.

The denizens of Hollywood and vicinity continue compiling entertaining letters by notables of fantasy fiction in each and every issue. If you want to supplement THE ETHER VIBRATES, try this little number. Mag is edited by members of LA SFL. Extra feature is autographs of contributors!

• • •

FANTASY-NEWS. 137-07 32nd Ave., Flushing, N. Y. Edited by James V. Taurasi, John Giunta, Sam Moskowitz and Mario Racic, Jr.

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• • •

ESCAPE. 86-10 117th St., Richmond Hill, N. Y. Edited by Dick Wilson.

Somewhat specialized, appealing mainly to the veteran fan. Would like to see this mag metamorph into a more elastic sheet, with material more popular in slant.

• • •

THE SCIENCE FICTION FAN. 728 28th St., Denver, Colorado. Edited by Olon F. Wiggins. Donald A. Wollheim, Hayward S. Kirby and James M. Rogers, associate editors.

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SCIENCE FICTION COLLECTOR. 1400 Frankford Ave., Philadelphia, Penna. Edited by John V. Baltadonis.

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MEET THE AUTHOR

●

TOMORROW'S WORLDS

By Edmond Hamilton

Author of "The Three Planeteers," This Month's Scientifiction Novel

THERE would he no purpose in writing any more about myaelf. I told All, in the sketch that was puhlished in the May STARTLING STORIES.

So inatead of talking ahout myself, I'd like to talk a little about THE THREE PLANETEERS.

A very common supposition in science-fiction seema to be that when interplanetary travel is finally achieved, snd there are populations of colonizing Earthmen on the other worlds, they will all be ruled by the same government and law, and that war and strife will be forgotten.

Now, I never could aee that as inevitable. In fact, it always seemed more reasonable to me to suppose that every world would have its own government. And here's why;

Juat think of what an effect distance has right here on Earth. Englishmen migrate to America—and a century or so later they find they just can't get along with the parent country any more, and declare their independence. The same thing happena to the Spaniards who colonized South and Central America. It's happening right now to South Africa and Australia.

Now, if that is true right now on Earth, surely it will he even more true in the future in the Solar System! Think of yourself, a few hundred years from now, on Mars. Your father was horn on Mars, and your grandfather. You know that several generationa hack one of your ancestors came here from Earth, hut you don't feel any loyalty to Earth. Mars is your world.

And yet here you are, with a government on Earth making the laws hy which you live. Those Earth people don't know Martian cooditions, and don't know what is or ia not practical out here on your world.

What would you do, in a situation like that? If precedent or history mean anything, ten to one you'd shine up your trusty atom-gun and go out with a lot of your fellow Martians to win your independence from Earth. And the chances are that you'd win it.

And in the centuries that followed, your descendants would be more and more true Martians, wouldn't they? They'd be modified hy generations of life in a new environment. The people of the different worlds, all of the same Earth stock, would grow more and more unlike each other. If they couldn't settle their differences they'd go to war.

That's the speculative background of THE THREE PLANETEERS. But it isn't any history of the future. It's a story. I hope it's a good story.

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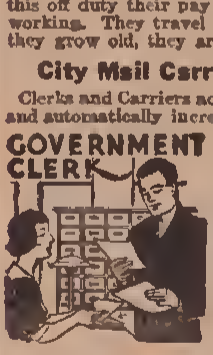

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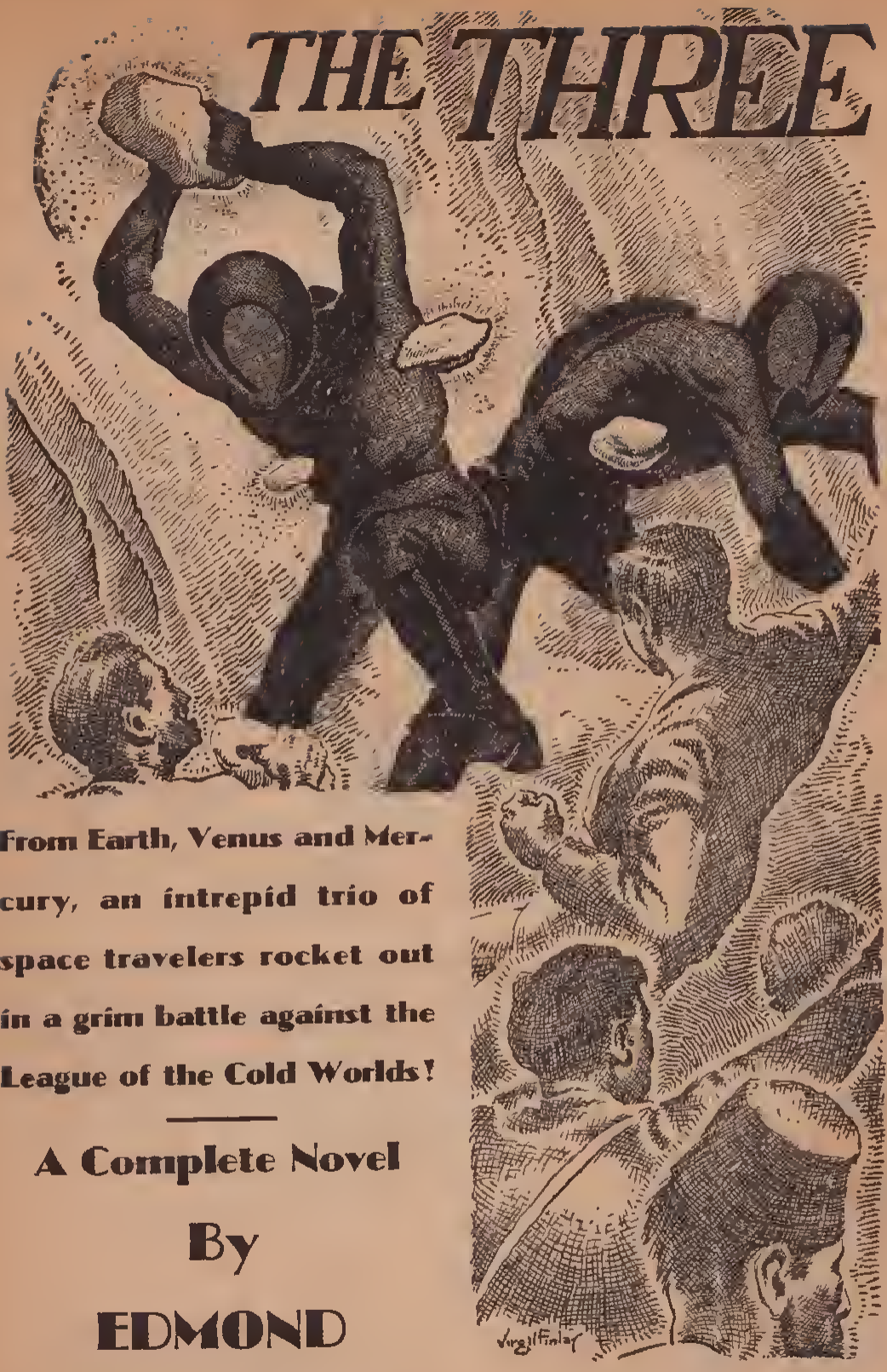
THE THREE



From Earth, Venus and Mercury, an intrepid trio of space travelers rocket out in a grim battle against the League of the Cold Worlds!

A Complete Novel

By

EDMOND HAMILTON

Author of "The Prisoner of Mars," "The Fear Neutralizer," etc.

Protected by their asterium-coated space-suits, the three comrades battled the radioactive men (Chap. XIX)

PLANETEERS

Illustrated by
VIRGIL FINLAY

CHAPTER I

Comrades of Peril

THEY sauntered through the crowded, kryptonlit street bordering the great New York spaceport, casually, as though there was not a reward on their heads. An Earthman, a Venusian, and a huge Mercurian, looking merely like three ordinary space-sailors in their soiled, drab jackets and trousers.

But inwardly John Thorn, the lean, dark-headed Earthman of the trio, was queerly tense. He felt the warning of that sixth sense which tells of being watched. His brown, hard-chinned face showed nothing of what he felt, and he was smiling as though telling some joke as he spoke to his two companions.

"We're being followed," he said. "I've felt it, since we left the spaceport. I don't know who it is."

Sual Av, the bald, bow-legged Venusian, laughed merrily as though at a jest. His bright green eyes glistened, and there was a wide grin on his ugly, froglike face.

"The police?" he chuckled.

Gunner Welk, the huge Mercurian, growled in his throat. His shock of yellow hair seemed to bristle on his head, his massive face and cold blue eyes hardening belligerently.

"How in hell's name would the Earth police spot us so quickly after our arrival?" he muttered.

"I don't think it's the police," John Thorn said, his black eyes still smiling casually. "Stop at this next corner, and we'll see who passes us."

AT the corner gleamed a luminous red sign, "THE CLUB OF WEARY SPACEMEN." In and out of the vibration-joint thus benevolently named were streaming dozens of the motley throng that jammed the blue-lit street. Reedy-looking red Martians, squat and surly Jovians, hard-bitten Earthmen — sailors from all the eight inhabited worlds, spewed up by the great spaceport nearby. There were many naval officers and men, too — a few in the crimson of Mars, the green of Venus and blue of Mercury, but most of them in the gray uniform of the Earth Navy.

John Thorn and his two comrades paused on the corner as though debating whether or not to enter the vibration-joint. Inwardly, Thorn was tautly alert to everyone who passed in the shuffling throngs. Every moment, his sense of peril grew greater. He was now certain that they were being watched from close at hand.

Sual Av suddenly grinned. "Look at that, John. It's a new one."

The Venusian nodded his bald head toward the corner of the chromaloy building, which was plastered with advertisements and official notices. Among them was a bright new poster.

WANTED—THE THREE PLANETEERS

Reward of one million dollars offered by the Earth Police for any information leading to the arrest of the outlaws known as the Three Planeteers.

Sual Av's green eyes gleamed with droll humor in his froglike face.

"They've raised the price on us, John. We ought to feel flattered."

Gunner Welk was reading the rest of the notice in a low, rumbling voice.

"The identities and descriptions of the Three Planeteers follow: John Thorn, Earthman, twenty-eight years old, deserter from the Earth Navy—"

"That's enough," Sual Av chuckled. "The rest is just a long list of our heinous exploits."

John Thorn took a long, green cigarette of Martian *rial* leaf from his pocket and scratched its tip against the wall, thus igniting it. As he puffed on it, Thorn spoke under his breath.

"Get ready, boys—here comes our shadow if my guess is right."

Neither the grinning, bald Venusian nor the big Mercurian changed expression. But their hands casually dropped to the side of their jackets, where atom-pistols bulged their pockets.

A man in the gray uniform of a non-com of the Earth Navy was shouldering toward them out of the passing throng. He was a middle-aged man with a flat, grizzled face.

"Can you spare a smoke, sailor?" he asked Thorn.

"Of course," John Thorn answered calmly, and fished one of the green cigarettes from his pocket. He kept his face bent as he handed it over.

"Thanks," muttered the man, and was gone in the throng.

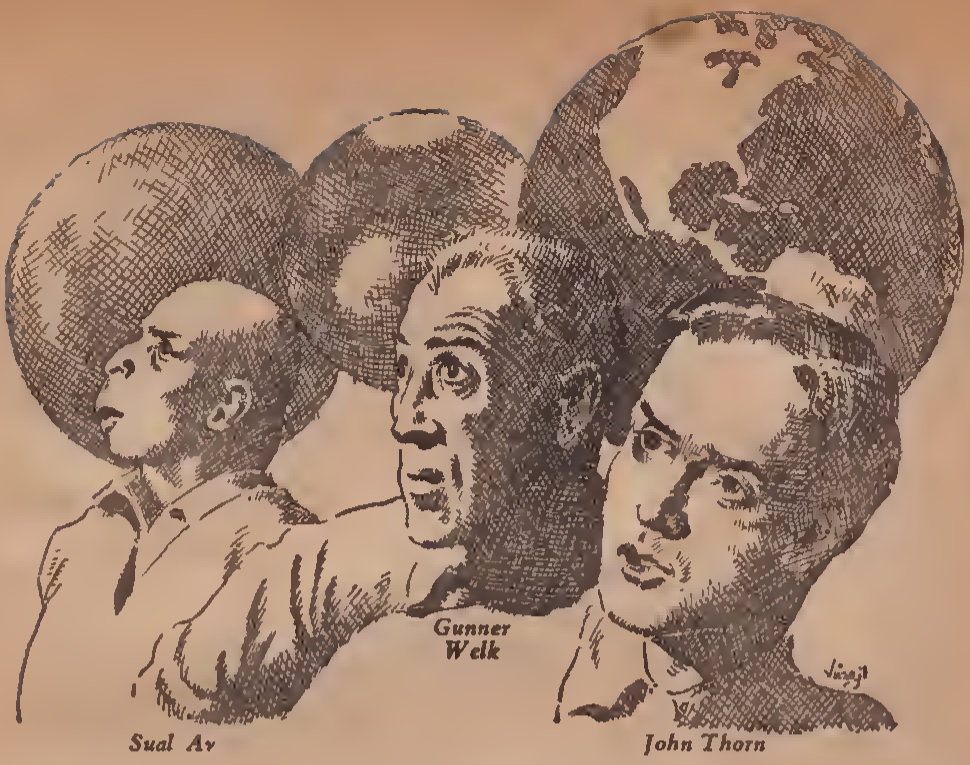
"A false alarm, after all," grunted Gunner Welk.

"No," clipped Thorn. "I know that man. He was one of my non-coms before I deserted the Navy. He knows I'm John Thorn, which means that he knows we're the Planeteers. He's gone for the police."

Thorn's gaze swiveled rapidly. Then he pushed his companions toward the swinging door of the vibration-joint.

"In here!" he exclaimed. "We can go out another door."

THRUMMING music hit John Thorn and his comrades in the faces as they entered the place. It



was a big metal-walled room, clogged with green smoke. Men at tables in the center were arguing in bull voices as they drank black Venusian wine or brown Earth whisky. In the booths around the walls, many more men sprawled somnolent, sleepy faces relaxed under the pale violet rays of the brain-soothing "happiness vibrations."

Thorn's lean figure shouldered through the noisy, crowded tables, the bald-pated Venusian and the towering Mercurian following closely. They were half-way across the crowded place toward the back door, when there was a rush of feet through the front entrance.

Thorn twisted his head. Two men in the white uniform of the Earth Police had just burst in. With them was the grizzled non-com. The latter instantly pointed at Thorn and his two companions.

"There they are!" he yelled. "The Three Planeteers!"

For a moment, the noisy throng in the place was petrified. Even that motley, hard-bitten crowd was frozen by the sudden declaration that there in their midst stood the three half-legendary interplanetary outlaws.

Then the foremost of the two policemen, drawing his atom pistol, yelled to Thorn.

"Stand where you are!"

Thorn's pistol was already in his hand, as was the big Mercurian's.

"The lights, Gunner!" Thorn cried.

At the same moment, Thorn shot up toward the ceiling with the quickness of a wolf's snap.

The pellets from his and the Mercurian's pistols hit the big cluster of krypton lights in the ceiling. The flare of white proton fire from the exploding pellets was followed by an abrupt extinguishing of the lights. The place was plunged in darkness except for the faint blue glow of the "happiness vibration" booths.

Scores of voices yelled in the darkness, and shadowy figures surged forward in a mêlée of reeling, clutching shapes. Some shouted for lights, others to guard the door. Everyone in the room had suddenly remembered the big reward for the capture of the Planeteers.

"This way," chuckled Sual Av's throaty voice in the darkness. The Venusian was stolidly clearing a path through the crowd.

Men sought to hold the three in the darkness, cried out that they were es-

caping. Gunner Welk's huge fists thudded down in resounding blows, while Thorn struck with the heavy barrel of his atom-pistol.

Suddenly Sual Av was pulling them out of the shadowy riot, through a door. They stumbled out into an unlighted alley. As they did so, they heard the whiz and roar of rocket-cars racing up to the front entrance of the Club of Weary Spacemen.

"Police," grunted Gunner Welk. "They'll be around here in a minute."

"Come on!" cried Thorn, starting down the dark alley in a run. "We're all right now if we keep clear of spy-plates."

"Yes," came the Venusian's chuckle as he ran beside them. "The last place they'll look for the Planeteers is the mansion of the Chairman!"

A HALF-HOUR later, the three comrades were two miles across the city from the spaceport, having threaded devious ways to avoid the omnipresent spy-plates of the police.

"Spy-plates" were televisor eyes mounted throughout the city, some openly but many more cunningly concealed, by which police headquarters could keep watch on all parts of the metropolis.

The Planeteers entered the deep shadow of tall trees that bordered extensive grounds. Through the trees glimmered the lighted windows of a magnificent metal mansion. The three comrades moved soundlessly as phantoms toward it.

The mansion was the official residence of the Chairman of the Earth Government. It was on a scale commensurate with the dignity of the elected executive of the planet. The huge tower that housed the Earth Government itself soared into the starlight from a great park nearby.

The Planeteers met no guards as they slipped cautiously toward the rear of the impressive mansion. There was a broad terrace here, splashed with blue-white light from a single window. John Thorn and his comrades stole up onto the terrace toward that window.

Thorn peered tautly into the lighted room. It was a small, paneled study. The only furniture was a big desk which lay in the blue-white pool of a krypton lamp. A gray-haired man sat at this desk, writing.

"It's the Chairman," Thorn whispered. "And he's alone."

"Good," muttered Gunner Welk. "That makes it easier."

Thorn gently reached and pushed on the window. It was unlocked, and swung inward on soundless hinges. He stepped silently in upon the soft rug, and Sual Av and Gunner Welk followed as noiselessly.

The man at the desk suddenly looked up. His haggard, aging face atiffened as he beheld, ten feet from him, the three silent men—the lean, browned young Earthman, the bald, bow-legged Venusian, and the towering, hard-faced Mercurian.

"The Planeteers!" exclaimed the Chairman, rising to his feet. "Thank God, you're here!"

CHAPTER II

Cold-World Menace

THE career of the Three Planeteers had begun four years previously, in 2952.

That year had seen the splitting of the eight independent inhabited worlds of the Solar System into two hostile alliances. The great and powerful League of Cold Worlds had been formed by Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune, under a ruthless, ambitious dictator. Feeling themselves menaced, Mercury, Venus, Earth and Mars had formed the Inner Alliance. The Alliance had sent out many spies to gain information of the League's threatening plans, but nearly all of them had rapidly been detected and executed.

Then John Thorn, captain in the Earth Navy, had conceived his patriotic plan. He and two friends, Sual Av, Venusian engineer, and Gunner Welk, Mercurian adventurer, would go forth into the underworld of the system as outlaws. And as fugitives

from the law, they would never he suspected of heing agents of the Alliance.

The three frienda had deliberately established criminal records. Thorn had deserted from the Earth Navy. Sual Av had fled after supposedly emhezzling a great sum—a sum which was heing secretly held in trust for its rightful owners. Gunner Welk had hroken jail after a hrawl on Mercury.

The three fugitive friends had foregathered, and thus had heen horn the three Planeteers. They had performed one daring exploit after another. Each time, their exploits seemed mere criminal raids or robheries. Yet each time, their real purpose had heen the securing of information as to the purposes and plans of the hostile, threatening League of Cold Worlds.

Now, the Three Planeteers were the most famous outlaws in the system. Three lone wolves of the void, extravagantly admired hy all criminals and pirates, hitterly condemned hy all law-ahiding men. Only one man—the Chairman of the Earth Government—knew that the notorious Planeteers were really undercover spies.

Now that man, Richard Hoskins, faced the three comrades with gladness in his eyes. His powerful face, deeply lined hy strain of reaponsihility, quivered with emotion.

"Thank God, you're here!" he repeated. "It'a been days since I aent out that call to you on the secret audio-wave. I was heginning to fear aomething had happened to you."

"We were almoat picked up hy the Earth Police tonight, air," John Thorn said quietly. "I was recognized."

The Chairman hastily cloaed the metal shutter of the window. There was a look of deep anxiety in his haggard eyes.

"Thorn, I knew I was aummoning you three into danger when I called you here. But I had to do it, for I've something to tell you which I dared not trust even to the secret wave. Something upon which the fate of the whole Inner Alliance may depend!

"But first, what can you report?" the Chairman asked tenaely. "The League is still preparing to attack us?"

Thorn nodded tightly. "Yes, sir. Every dock and arsenal from Jupiter to Neptune is humming with activity. The League will have at leaat ten thousand cruisers ready in a few weeks, the atory goes. They're working their mining bases out on Pluto at full capacity, digging fuel ores. And there's a rumor that they've planned aome new and terrihle agent of destruction with which they will hlast our worlds into submission, after they've smashed our fleet!

"Furthermore," Thorn added, "the League dictator, Haskell Trask, is constantly broadcasting inflammatory speeches to hia four worlds. He's atirring up their war fever to frenzy, telling them that since the worlds of the Inner Alliance refuse to cede any territory, it muat be taken from them by force."

CHAIRMAN HOSKINS nodded somherly. "I've heard Trask's hroadcast speeches. It'a that cursed power-lusting dictator who's driving the system toward war. If we'd only recognized sooner what a menace he is, we wouldn't have let the League get so far ahead of us in armaments. As it is, when their attack comes, they'll outnumher our comhined. navies hy two to one. They'll overwhelm our fleet, unless—"

"Unless what, sir?" Thorn asked tensely.

"Unless we can use a new weapon we have," the Chairman finished. "A weapon such aa the system never heard of hefore."

He paced the little atudy for a few moments, and then turned back to the rigidly watching Planeteers.

"You've heard of Philip Blaine, our famous Earth physicist?" he asked.

Sual Av's hald head bohhed. "I have, sir. He disappeared, a year ago. No one knows where he ia now."

"Blaine," said the Chairman, "ia in Earth's moon. For a year, he's heen working in secret lahoratories in the lunar caverns. He's developed a radical, revolutionary new weapon. I dare

not tell even you the nature of that weapon. But it will enahle us to defeat the overpowering attack of the League fleet—if we can use it!"

"If we can use it, sir?" puzzled Gunner Welk.

"Yes. For Blaine's weapon is useless, as it stands now. To operate the thing requires concentrated power of incredihle volume. Atomic energy from ordinary fuels is insufficient. The only fuel that will furnish enough atomic energy to operate this thing is radite, that rare isotope of radium. To make use of Blaine's great weapon, we must have a ton of pure radite."

"A ton of pure radite?" exclaimed Thorn incredulously. "Why, not one of the eight worlds has more than a few pounds of the stuff! It takes thousands of tons of ore to yield an ounce!"

"There is a ton of pure radite in the system," the Chairman affirmed. "But it's not on any of the eight inhabited worlds."

"It can't be on Pluto, surely," protested Sual Av. "The League mining bases there would have found it long ago."

"It's farther than Pluto," the Chairman said.

John Thorn stared. "You mean, it's on Erebus?"

The Chairman nodded slowly. "Yes, it's on Erehus, the tenth and outermost planet, that mysterious, unexplored world that swings out there in space a billion miles beyond even Pluto's orhit."

"How can anyone know the radite's there?" Gunner Welk demanded unhelievingly. "Why, no one knows what's on Erebus! Not one of tbe expeditions that sailed for that planet ever came hack. For centuries, no one has even tried to explore that mystery world!"

"Years ago," the Cbairman said, "astronomers detected the presence of a mass of pure radite on Erebus, through their spectroscopes. Supervaluahle as radite is, no one has tried to go after it, for all know it's suicide to try to visit Erehus."

The Chairman's lined face quivered. "But now we've *got* to have that radite! It alone will operate Blaine's new secret weapon. It alone will enable us to resist the League's attack, and preserve the liherty of these four inner worlds."

HE looked at the three comrades solemnly. "We have sent five hig secret expeditions to Erebus during the last year, in desperate hope of getting the radite. Not one ship, not one man, not one message has ever come hack from them. The sinister mystery there swallowed them up, as it has swallowed all who tried to visit Erebus.

"Now I am calling on you Planeteers. If anyhody in the system can reach Erehus and hring hack the radite, you can. The chances are a thousand to one you'll perish there as mysteriously as have all other would-be explorers of that world. But that thousandth chance that you might succeed and bring back the radite, is the last chance of the Alliance worlds to preserve their liberty."

"We'll go, sir, of course!" Gunner Welk exclaimed instantly. "Hell, whatever's on Erehus, it can't stop *us!*"

Sual Av scratched his bald head. "I wonder what is really there? Anyway, if human men can bring that radite hack—"

"Wait a minute!" Thorn exclaimed, his lean, brown face suddenly eager. He turned to the Chairman. "You said nobody had ever landed on Erehus and returned, sir. But one man did land there and come hack. Martin Cain, the great space pirate of a generation ago."

The Chairman nodded. "Yes, I rememher the story now. Cain is supposed to have made for Erehus alone in a lifeboat when his ship was gunned to a wreck outside Pluto's orbit. They say he spent two weeks there and returned safely, the only man ever to do so."

"Martin Cain," Thorn pointed out tensely, "must have discovered the secret of how to land safely on Erebus. If we knew that secret, we could land there safely and lift the radite!"

Using their impellers, the Three Planeteers left the wreck and rocketed gently toward the open air-lock of the waiting pirate craft (Chap. IV)

"But Cain has been dead for years," the Chairman reminded. "And he never told anyone what was on Erehus, they say."

"He told *one* person the secret of Erebus, if what I've heard in the underworld is true," John Thorn persisted. "His daughter, Lana Cain."

The Chairman stared. "Lana Cain, the girl who's leader of the space pirates out in the Zone? The girl they call the pirate princess?"

"That's right," Thorn said tautly. "They say that Martin Cain, her father, before he died told her the secret of how to visit Erehus safely, so she could take refuge there if ever she had to. She's never told anyone the secret. But she knows it!"

Sual Av's green eyes glistened. "If we could get that secret from Lana Cain—"

"That's my idea!" Thorn exclaimed. "If we three go straight to Erebus to get the radite, the chances are a thousand to one as you say that we'll simply meet the same mysterious fate as all other explorers, and never come back. Our lives don't matter, of course, but the Alliance wouldn't get that precious radite.

"Our only real chance, as I see it, is to make first for the Zone, and get this girl Lain Cain's knowledge of Erebus, by trickery or force. With that knowledge, we can go on to Erebus and have a fighting chance of winning through and bringing back the radite."

A flame of eager hope leaped into the haggard eyes of the Earth Government executive.

"It's the best plan yet, Thorn! But dare you enter the Zone and seek out this pirate girl? Those corsairs are ferociously hostile and suspicious of all strangers."

"You forget, sir," flashed John Thorn, "that we are the Three Planeteers!"

"Yes," rumhled Gunner Welk, cold blue eyes gleaming. "We have a reputation of our own among the outlaws of the system, sir."

SUAL AV grinned.

"I always did have a hidden longing to be a pirate."

"Thorn, you give me new hope!" declared the Chairman. "If you can do this, in the little time left us—"

"Listen!" commanded Gunner Welk suddenly.

Through the locked door and metal-shuttered window of the study penetrated a rising tumult, the roar of rocket-cars racing up to the mansion. Then came a rush of running feet through it, and a loud knock on the door.

"Mr. Hoskins!" called a secretary anxiously to the Chairman through the door. "The police are here! They say the Three Planteers are in the city tonight, and were glimpsed by spy-plates heading toward this mansion. They want to make sure you're safe."

"The cursed Earth Police!" flared Gunner Welk in a hoarse whisper. "We overlooked some of their spy-plates."

Thorn's eyes were black pinpoints, his brown face taut. He knew the Mercurian was right, that they had been glimpsed hy some of the hidden visiplates planted cunningly throughout the metropolis for the henefit of the police.

"I'm all right, Ames!" called the Chairman to his secretary. "Tell the police not to hother me."

But in the next moment came a loud cry from a police officer outside the shuttered windows.

"*The Planeteers are in there with the Chairman!*" the man shouted. "Their tracks lead to the window—they must be making him say he's all right!"

"Break down the door!" roared another officer's voice. "Quick, before they kill the Chairman!"

A resounding battering began against the locked door, and another banging at the metal shutter that closed the window.

The Chairman looked helplessly at Thorn. "I'll have to tell them the truth, that you Planeteers are really my agents, or they'll haul you off to prison."

"No!" said John Thorn fiercely. "Once the secret that we're Alliance agents gets out, it would spread swiftly over the whole system. Our

chance of getting the secret of Erehus from that pirate girl would he wrecked—our whole plan ruined."

"But you can't escape from here now!" the Chairman exclaimed. "They're at hoth window and door!"

"We can escape," Thorn said swiftly. "But we've got to make it look as though we came here for a criminal purpose. Otherwise, people will ask why the Planeteers came to the Chairman's mansion, and it will be guessed that we're really your agents after all."

Thorn drew a roll of flexihle metal cord from his pocket, and sprang toward the Chairman.

"Forgive me for this, sir," he cried.

The bewildered Chairman did not resist as Thorn bound his arms and legs tightly. Then the young Earthman straightened.

"Tell them we tried to kidnap you, sir," he said swiftly to the Chairman. "That we meant to hold you for ransom."

Gunner Welk stood ready now to open the window shutter. And Sual Av had taken a little metal sphere from his pocket.

"You're right—the light-bomh is our hest chance," Thorn clipped. "Throw it when Gunner opens the window."

GUNNER WELK suddenly flung open the shutter. Before the police hammering outside it could enter, the bald Venusian flung out the tiny sphere. The Planeteers clapped their hands in front of their eyes.

The sphere hurst out on the terrace amid the pressing group of police. A terrific glare of hlazing white light exploded from the homh. A tiny charge of atoms inside it had been suddenly hroken down, not into energy, hut into pure radiation in the frequency of light. The awful glare of radiation instantly paralyzed the optic nerves of the unprepared police, temporarily hlinding them.

The glare died swiftly. Thorn and his two comrades were already plunging out through the blinded men.

"This way!" Thorn cried.

"They're escaping!" yelled a hlinded officer.

The Planeteers plunged around the corner of the huge mansion, toward the long, low rocket-cars parked in front.

Sual Av jumped into one, whose power-chamher was throhbing. As the others leaped in after him, the hald Venusian yanked hack the throttle. The car rahhited out through the dark grounds with a rising roar from the rocket-tuhes at its rear.

"Straight for the spaceport!" Thorn yelled.

"Hold tight!" called Sual Av, with a throaty laugh. "I always did want to let one of these things out!"

A whizz and roar, a spuming flash of fire—that was the stolen rocket-car it shot through the streets. Its speed was suicidal, hut streets were almost empty at this late hour.

Now the spaceport was close ahead —Thorn could see the soaring tower of the starter, flashing vari-colored landing signals to a huge freighter that was sinking ponderously down out of the stars with all its hlasts braking.

The audio speaker in the car hroke into frantic voice. "All police! The Planeteers have stolen a police rocket-car and are making for the spaceport, after making an attempt to kidnap the Chsirman! Shoot on sight!"

"Look ahead!" yelled Gunner Welk.

Men in white uniforms were running across the spaceport toward them, between the great docks and the hig freighters and liners that rested like huge torpedoes on the tarmac.

"They're too late!" the Venusian chuckled. "Here's our ship."

Before them loomed the three-man scout cruiser that had hrought them to Earth, a long, torpedo-slim craft of gleaming inertrum, on its nose the numher N-77. The thick-clustered tuhes at its stern told of immense powers of acceleration and speed.

John Thorn and his comrades tumbled into the little ship, as atom-pistols coughed and shells exploded in white proton-fire around them. Sual Av spun the heavy, round door shut while Thorn and the Mercurian leaped into the control-room in the nose.

Thorn's hands flashed amid the bewildering array of controls, and the power-chambers in the stern began a soft, rising roar of atomic energy.

Thorn jammed down two firing-keys. With thunderous blast, white fire burst from the keel tubes of the cruiser. It lurched upward, riding its columns of proton-flame, then shooting obliquely up across the spaceport as Thorn cut in all the stern tubes.

He was flung back deep into the cushioned pilot chair, his entrails seeming crushed by the terrific acceleration. The shadowed convexity of Earth fell away appallingly beneath them, as the sharp clang of the friction-alarm told of walls being dangerously overheated hy the too-rapid rush through the air. Then the roar of air outside the walls died rapidly away. They were out in space.

"We're clear!" shouted Sual Av, stumbling into the control room, his grin twisted by pain of shock.

"Clear, yes—but every Eartb cruiser in space will be after us now for trying to kidnap the Cbairman!" Thorn rapped. "We've got to reach the Zone before they catch us!"

CHAPTER III

Into the Zone

"Oh, the gloom of outer space,
Where the tailless comets race,
And the sun's a star that almost disappears.
When our rockets' steady roar.
Sings the good old song once more,
We're outward bound again, oh, Planeteers!"

SUAL AV'S throaty bass reverberated through the little control-room of the cruiser, in which he sat with Gunner Welk. It rose above the soft hissing of the rocket-tubes.

"Curse me if I can see anything to make up songs about," growled the big Mercurian.

"You have no poetry in your soul, Gunner," retorted the little Venusian with a grin. "A poetic genius like myself doesn't make up his songs—they come to him out of the great ether."

"Tbey sound uncommonly like the bellowing of a Jovian marsh-calf when they do force themselves out," said Gunner Welk dourly. "Besides, you'll wake up John."

"I'm awake," came a voice behind them, and they turned.

Thorn came into the control-room, ruhbing his eyes. Then he peered tautly through the broad window that framed a magnificent vista of black space and stars.

"What about the cruisers on our tail?" he asked quickly.

The big Mercurian shrugged. "They're hanging on — we've heard their audio calls. And they've called up every Alliance cruiser in this part of the system. We've stirred up a hornets' nest this time, John!"

John Thorn cut in the switch of the audio. From the speaker came a weird jumble of meaningless sound. All naval calls were always "scrambled" to prevent eavesdropping; only an official unscrambler could translate them.

There was such an unscrambler in this little ship. Thorn had built it, out of his own naval experience. He hastily snapped it on, and the incoherent jumhle of sounds from the speaker at once became a crisp, understandable voice.

"—our auras, which shows that present course of the fugitives is straight toward the Zone. Undoubtedly they're hoping to hide out there. It is imperative that we cut them off before they enter the Zone. Flagship *Gull*, signing off."

"The *Gull!*" Thorn exclaimed, his brown face strange for a moment. "I know that ship. It was old Commander Leigh speaking. He commands the Alliance patrol squadrons out here."

His thoughts swept him back into memory for a moment. He had, only four years before, commanded a cruiser of the Earth Navy that helped patrol this very sector of space, out here beyond the orbit of Mars, agsinst a surprise League attack.

"They've guessed that we're making for the Zone," Thorn went on. "It's where all outlaws head for when things get too hot for them."

"The whole system is too hot for us right now," observed Sual Av. "You should have heard the audio news bulletins going back and forth while you were slepping. "Three Planeteers try to kidnap Earth Chairman!' 'Notorious outlaws foiled in daring attempt.' The system's ringing with it!"

"It'll ring with the news if we're gunned out of space by those cruisers converging on us," grunted Gunner Welk sourly. "Do you think we can slip through them, John?"

"I think so," Thorn clipped. "We've got to keep straight on. Turkoon, the asteroid that's the pirates' main base, lies in the part of the Zone almost directly ahead."

THORN stared with narrowed eyes through the broad window, into the magnificent star-flecked vault.

The little ship of the Planeteers was roaring out through the void at top speed, millions of miles outside the orbit of Mars. The bright, small disk of the sun was dead astern, its rays hiding the gray blob of Earth, away from which they had been fleeing for so many long hours.

Ahead of them, the void was thick with bright stars. Brilliant among them gleamed the big yellow topaz of Saturn, and beyond and to the left the fainter green sparks of Uranus and Neptune. Pluto was somewhere farther, away off to the right. And Erebus, their mysterious, ultimate goal, lay invisible still farther off—the dark, enigmatic outpost of the solar system.

Directly ahead of the racing little ship, only a few million miles away, extended a wide band of countless tiny specks of light, stretching parallel with the equator of the system. That broad band of light-specks was the Zone, the great asteroidal belt whirling between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter.

Thorn gazed tautly into the Zone. That mighty wilderness of countless planetoids and meteor-swarms, which all ordinary shipping avoided by running above or below, was the No Man's Land of the Solar System. In it the space pirates had long had their lairs,

Haskell Trask

from which they still sallied forth to levy toll on the interplanetary shipping. Countless naval expeditions had tried to clean the place out, and had been baffled by the shifting swarms of meteors and tiny planets which made it impossible to conduct organized operations in there without prohibitive losses.

John Thorn's brown hands clenched. In there in the Zone, at the pirates' asteroid base, was the girl who alone in the system held the secret of mysterious Erebus, the secret that would make possible the securing of the precious radite from that far, dark planet. Somehow, that girl's secret must be secured.

"Calling flagship *Gull!*" suddenly boomed a deep voice from the audio speaker. "Cruiser *Tharine*, reporting. Our aura shows the Planeteers' ship four hundred thousand miles from us, eighteen degrees counter-sunwise."

"Orders to *Tharine*," rapped back Commander Leigh's hard voice swiftly. "Close in before they slip past you into the Zone. Calling cruiser *Rantal!*"

"*Rantal* speaking!" came a quick voice.

"Change your course to eighty-six degrees sunwise," hammered the Com-

mander. "You and the *Tharine* can catch the Planeteers between you if you put on all speed."

Sual Av scratched his bald head and looked at Thorn. "They're converging on us from two sides, John."

"Damn them!" growled the huge Mercurian angrily. "If they only knew that we Planeteers are risking our necks for the sake of the Alliance—"

"But they don't know. To them, we're outlaws who must be either captured or gunned," John Thorn clipped. "We've got to outrun those two cruisers! Turn the injectors on full, Gunner."

The Mercurian quickly obeyed. Thorn leaned toward the bank of firing-keys, his eyes on the power gauges.

All modern space ships were propelled by the atomic disintegration of copper or s similar metal. The powdered metal's atoms were hroken down by terrific electric voltages, in power chambers of heavy inertrum. Only inertrum, that artificial metal whose atoms were synthetically "crystallized," could stand the awful strain.

MUCH of the atomic energy generated in the chambers had to be fed back into them as electric voltage, to continue the process. But there was enough surplus to eject streams of protons at high speed from the inertrum rocket-tubes, propelling the ship.

John Thorn cut in all stern tuhes. The little ship jerked forward with the deafening roar of the blast.

"Check the aura-chart," he ordered Sual Av. "See if we're losing those cruisers."

The Venusian snapped on their ship's aura. The "aura" was a field of electro-magnetic vihrations radiated for a million miles in all directions by a projector in the ship. The vibrations were reflected back hy any object within that radius of space, and automatically plotted and recorded on the aurs-chart.

The chart was a sphere of pale light, poised above the window. At the center of the luminous sphere was a black dot representing their ship. Off to right and left of the hlsck dot moved two red sparks, cutting in obliquely toward them as all advanced.

"They're close—no more than a quarter of a million miles," reported Sual Av.

"The Zone isn't much farther than that ahead," Thorn declsred.

"But there's a hig meteor swsrm in the Zone directly ahead of us!" Gunner Welk exclaimed. "We can't run into that!"

In the fore of the aura-chart sphere glimmered a cloud of very tiny crimson flecks, whirling, seething. It was the edge of a great cloud of meteors at the lip of the Zone, stretching across a million miles of space in front of their fleeing little ship.

Thorn could *see* the swarm in hlack space ahead. Not the myriad meteors themselves, but a constant winking and flashing of tiny flares, where meteors in the whirling storm of stone struck and fused every few minutes.

"*Rantal* reporting!" rapped the sudio speaker. "Planeteers are now keeping their lead on us, and running straight on toward the Zone."

"Keep after them!" ordered the Commander's grim voice. "Swarm six-sixty-two is just ahead of them and they won't dare enter that—we'll have them boxed."

"You heard, hoys," said John Thorn tightly. "There's just one thing to do—run the swarm."

"Let her go!" grinned Sual Av. "It takes more than a few meteors to stop the Planeteers."

"One thing sure," said Gunner grimly. "If we do run it safely, we'll lose those cruisers. They won't dare follow."

John Thorn knew the peril into which their little ship was roaring. The chance of their winning through that vast, whirling stone-storm was less than one in two.

But the naval cruisers would not follow them in there, he was sure. And if he co*uld* run the swarm, he would he well inside the Zone snd could turn and run counter-sunwise toward the asteroid Turkoon, without fear of further pursuit.

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"Here goes!" Sual Av breathed, as the aura-chart showed their ship approaching the edge of the great swarm.

The chart showed the two converging cruisers making a frantic effort to head them off. But it was too late. Already, in the chart, the Planeteers' ship was entering the swarm.

Thorn looked forth tensely through the window. The aura was useless now that they were actually in the swarm. His only chance now was in the quickness of his eyes and hands.

SPACE outside the window still looked empty, for the density of even the densest meteor swarm is not high. But Thorn could glimpse all around them the quick red glows, quickly fading and re-appearing, of meteors colliding and fusing.

A jagged black oblong mass, turning over slowly, expanded with lightning speed in front of him. His hand smashed a starboard-tube firing key, and the little ship lurched wildly aside from the oncoming monster.

A moment later, two smaller black masses passed some distance on the right, revolving around each other. Then there was a rattle as of hail, as tiny particles struck the ship walls.

Scree-e-e! The tiny scream of air escaping through a pierced wall reached their ears with startling suddenness.

"Hull punctured!" rasped Thorn, without turning.

"I'll get it!" panted Sual Av, grabbing up the electro-fusing kit and darting toward the tiny hole in the wall.

"Better get our space-suits on," Thorn continued rapidly without turning his head. "We may get holed again."

Gunner Welk hastily hauled in the suits from a cabinet amidships. The Mercurian took over for a moment while Thorn struggled into the suit and glassite helmet, and then Thorn went back to his tense watch while his two comrades donned their suits.

A soundless flash of red light burgeoned on the left in space, faded, and then blazed up again and veered toward the ship as a third meteor struck the two that had just collided.

Thorn frantically swung the ship upward. The fusing, swiftly-cooling mass passed close underneath.

Another mass of bulletlike particles struck the racing ship. Air screeched out through new holes, and the air-gauge on the panel started flashing a warning red light as pressure diminished. Sual Av was working hastily with the fusing kit to close the new hull-punctures.

Thorn glimpsed a peculiar gleaming meteor directly ahead, coming dead on at the ship. He had plenty of time to curve the ship aside. But as he did so—

"Ahove you!" yelled Gunner Welk wildly.

Thorn looked up, just glimpsed the huge, ponderous mass thundering down on the ship from ahove—a tiny planetoid, black and jagged and massive, spinning on its axis as it bore noiselessly down on them.

Thorn's hand on the keys hlasted the ship to starhoard with the speed of light. But he knew, even as he acted, that he was too late. He could not quite get clear.

There came a grinding shock, a scream of riven metal. He and Gunner Welk were thrown crazily together at a side of the control-room. His head rang inside his helmet.

He scramhled up, clutching a stanchion. There was a dead, unusual silence. He looked hack into the stern of the ship, past Sual Av, who was scrambling unsteadily to their side.

"WE'RE wrecked!" Thorn exclaimed, his heart plummeting.

The little planetoid had crumpled up the whole stern half of the ship like cardhoard. The air inside it was gone. The crumpled little craft was drifting silently in space, revolving slowly around the jagged planetoid that had heen its Nemesis.

"Hell!" swore Gunner Welk, his voice coming to the other two in their helmets through the short-range audio with which all space-suits were equipped. "We were almost through, too!"

"What do we do now?" Sual Av

asked, his green eyes perplexedly staring through the glassite of his helmet.

Thorn shrugged heavily. "I don't know. I was a fool to try to run the swarm. But it looked like our best chance."

"It was," said the big Mercurian loyally. "Even though we didn't quite make it."

"We've got to get out of here somehow to Turkoon, that pirate asteroid," Thorn said. "We can't just cling to this wreck until the oxygen in our suit-tanks gives out."

He examined the audio and other instruments. All wrecked by the shock. "I suppose we're lucky to escape with our lives. But we've merely postponed death if we can't get away from here."

Sual Av peered out through the cracked window, into the black abyss in which they were floating. The Venusian stiffened as he glimpsed something beyond the jagged, spinning planetoid about which their wreck was revolving.

"John, a ship is running up along the edge of the swarm!" he exclaimed. "I can see its lights!"

Thorn and the Mercurian leaped to the window. They stared at the little blob of light, coming slowly closer.

"If it's one of those cruisers that pursued us, we're done for," said Gunner Welk tautly.

"It's not!" cried Thorn suddenly. "It's a pirate ship!"

CHAPTER IV

Pirate Princess

THEY saw the distant ship coast the edge of the vast meteor swarm for some minutes and then come to a halt in space, with a prolonged flash of its bow rocket-tubes halting it.

A moment later a cracked, shrill voice sounded from the little audio-speakers inside their helmets.

"Ahoy, Planeteers! Are any of you alive in that wreck?"

Thorn answered instantly. "We're all alive—John Thorn speaking."

"I figgered it'd take more than a meteor-swarm to finish you three," retorted the cracked voice, chuckling.

"Who's speaking? What ship is that?" Thorn demanded.

"Cautious, ain't ye?" said the shrill voice, with a cackle of mirth. "I don't blame you, seeing how you boys was chased. But you needn't worry—this ain't no naval cruiser. We're Companions of Space. Want to come aboard?"

"Companions of Space? Pirates, eh?" Thorn said. "Yes, we'll come aboard."

"Figgered you would," cackled the other. "We'll stand by, and you can come across with your impellers."

Thorn switched off his suit-audio and spoke to his two companions, clutching their arms to conduct his voice to them.

"Cut your audios and listen," he said tautly. "These pirates may plan some kind of treachery, but I don't think so. This looks like our chance to get to their base at Turkoon. But if we get there, don't mention Erebus or the radite, whatever you do."

"We understand," Gunner Welk muttered.

They each got a torchlike metal impeller from a locker, and then wrenched open the door amidships. Bracing his feet against its edge, John Thorn leaped out into the abyss.

He shot floatingly away from the wreck. As his momentum faded and he began to float back toward the wreck, Thorn switched on the impeller in his hand. The blast from it kicked his space-suited figure on through space.

Sual Av and the big Mercurian were following closely. The three progressed thus, with frequent flashes from their impellers thrusting them on toward the distant waiting pirate ship.

Bright stars gleamed like millions of watching eyes all around Thorn. He glimpsed the ominous red flash of colliding meteors, nearby. He had to turn constantly to make sure that they were moving toward the waiting craft. Soon they were very close to it, moving faster now that its slight gravitational field drew them.

Thorn eyed the long, grim ship that floated here in space just outside the edge of the vast swarm. He judged that it had once been a Neptunian or

Ursnian nsval eruiser — the design was one adapted to great distances, and the ominous muzzles of stom-guns peering forth along its sides spoke of heavy armament.

The Plsneteers bumped the side of the vessel. They scrambled along it, and into the waiting open air-lock.

A MINUTE later they were inside, unscrewing their helmets and gazing about a lighted metal chamber. A half-dozen armed men were here, and one of them came forward to the three.

"So you're the famous Three Planeteers, eh?" he sske in the same crscked, quavering voice they had previously heard.

The speaker was an old, snow-hsired Martian, his thin figure stooped, his red face incredibly wrinkled with sge, his faded, rheumy eyes peering at them shortsightedly. He wore two stom-pistols in his belt, and was chewing *rial* leaf whose green juice he spat occasionally into a floor receptacle.

"Curse me if it doesn't do me good to look at you," quavered the oldster, his oath making astounding contrast with his cracked voice and senile spearance. "Aye, it warms my heart to look at men the like of which I was myself, in the old days."

"Who sre you?" Thorn asked steadily. "How did you happen along to pick us up?"

"As for who I am, the name is Stilicho Keene. Ever hear of it?" the old pirate answered shrilly.

"Stilicho Keene?" repeated Sual Av incredulously. "The notorious pirate of forty years ago?"

"The same," answered the old Martian complacently. "Aye, long before you Planeteers was ever born, I was one of the lesders of the Companions of Space, back in the days when there were men in space and not the kind of milksops I have to give orders to now."

"You still haven't told us how you happened to be near to pick us up," Thorn reminded.

The CAUPHUL *hurtled between the* LIGHTNING *and the League cruiser grappling it (Chap. VII)*

Stilicho Keene turned his rheumy eyes on the young earthman. He chuckled as he spat *rial* juice.

"Sharp and curious, ain't ye? Well, I'd expect it of you. I was the same at your age, smart and quick and bold. But you were asking how we happened along. Well, this is the *Venture*, and we've been to Jupiter on a little errand for Princess Lana. Coming back, we heard the audio-calls of them cruisers chasing you Planeteers.

"We heard them give up the chase after you ducked into that meteor-swarm. So I gave order to lay a course near the swarm, hoping we might meet you—and then we sighted your wreck. It looks like you'll have to go on to Turkoon with us now."

Thc old pirate continued admiringly, "I've heard a lot of you lads and the fine things you've done. The time you raided the governor's office at Titan and stole all that platinum, and the time you three alone held up that hig Martian liner and rohbed all the passengers of their valuahles."

The old pirate could not know, Thorn thought grimly, that that raid on Titan had been really to secure League naval secrets and the platinum a mere hlind, or that the hold-up of the Martian liner had had as its real objective the securing of a valuahle new atom-gun drawing among the effects of a Jovian engineer.

"So when we get to Turkoon," old Stilicho Keene was continuing eagerly, "mayhc you Planeteers would think of joining up with us Companions, ch? It would be good to have some real men with us again, men such as I used to rocket with wben I was young."

John Thorn's pulses leaped at the offer. But he kept his excitement hidden, and frowned a little.

"The Three Planeteers join an outfit led by a girl?" he returned a little disdainfully.

"You wait till you meet this girl," the old Martian told him. "You'll find she's a rcal leader, is Lana Cain."

"We'll talk of it when we get to Turkoon," Thorn told him. "Anyway, we're damned grateful to you for picking us up."

"Aye, you bit off a little more than even you could chew, didn't you, on Earth?" cackled the hoary old sinner. "It warmed my heart to think of it. Kidnaping the Chairman of Earth! Only the Planeteers would have thought of trying that!"

OLD Stilicho Keene led the way through the dusky corridors and catwalks of the ship. The Planeteers shouldered past members of the crew who stared admiringly at them.

These pirates were a motley aggregation from every planet in the system—Martians, Saturnians and Uranians, wicked - looking Earthmen, fighters all, from the look of them.

Thorn and his comrades emerged after old Stilicho Keene into the hroad, glassite-fronted control-room. A surly Jovian stood at the firing-keys, and a nervous, green-faced, hollow-eyed Saturnian at the bank of instruments on the right.

"Get going to Turkoon, Barho," ordered the old pirate commander.

With roar of stern-tubes pouring forth proton-fire, the heavy cruiser shot forward in space.

John Thorn looked through the broad glassite windows. The *Venture* was moving counter-sunwise into the very hcart of the Zone. Space ahead seemed thick with whirling clouds of light-specks that were meteor swarms, and steady bright sparks that were booming planetoids.

"How the devil do you navigate this damned jungle, anyway?" Gunner Welk asked the old Martian.

Stilicho Keene's wrinkled face grinned. "Tbat's easy. We've got a little projector of vibrations planted on every big asteroid and in all swarms—each projector emitting a wave of a different frequency. We pick up the signals, and they show us just how far and in what direction each swarm and asteroid is, so we can avoid them. Just like the lighthouses on the Earth seas, centuries ago."

He added with cunning satisfaction, "The signals don't help naval cruisers or other ships navigate the Zone, because they don't know the frequency-code and can't tell what's meant by the

signals they hear. They've lost so many cruisers trying to get in here at us, that they gave it up as a bad job."

The ship forged on through the wilderness of the Zone, constantly detouring to avoid the many parils to navigation that abounded here. It coasted along vast swarms, cut sharply upward to evade planetoids, slipped close past a small tailless comet that glimmered like a little white ghost sun.

Then John Thorn made out a small green speck in the blackness, toward which the *Venture* was now heading directly. It widened rapidly into a green disk. His black eyes narrowed.

"That's Turkoon, isn't it?"

"Aye, that's old Turkoon," quavered Stilicho Keene. "The sweetest, safest, anuggest little harbor in the whole system. Good air and good water, and ringed round with all those swarms and asteroids that keep the prying naval cruisers away. A paradise for us gentlemen of the void. Aye, there it lies, like a pretty emerald in space, just as it lay when I first saw it long ago.

"It's seen a plenty, has old Turkoon. It's seen the bloody days of the old wild corsairs, with the searred ships roaring in to it, loaded with ores and jewels and silks and women. It's seen the days of Martin Cain, a generation ago, when full a thousand ships of the Companions put forth to space at one time. It's seen them all come and go —all the great, brave gentlemen of the void, has old Turkoon."

"And now," Thorn said ironically, "it sees the Companions led by a girl."

"Aye, boy," shrilled the old pirate, "it sees a girl leading us now. But she's Martin Cain's daughter — as deadly dangerous as ever her sire was. Aye, and as great a leader."

THE *Venture* roared closer to the green asteroid and then dropped rapidly toward it, air whistling outside its walls.

"I didn't think an asteroid this small could have an atmosphere," commented Sual Av, peering downward.

"It must have unusual mass for its size—probably a core of neutronium or other super - heavy elements," Thorn guessed. "Otherwise, the escape of its air molecules would be inevitable, and it wouldn't be able to hold an atmosphere."

"Let's hope that nothing holds us here, once we get what we're after," muttered Gunner Welk.

Thorn was taut with the same thought. Down in this hell's nest of pirates was a girl with a secret that would save four worlds from conquest —if they could get it from her.

Turkoon widened beneath them, a little world blanketed by thick green fern-jungles. Directly underneath was a raw brown oval, a big clearing that had been blasted from the jungle. At one end of it gleamed the straggling chromaloy buildings of a town of considerable size, while parked ships covered the rest of the field.

The *Venture* landed with a roar of brake-blasts and a bumping jar beside the scores of parked ships. The door ports were rapidly unscrewed, and warm, heavy air hit the Planeteers' faces as they followed old Stilicho Keene out of the ship.

"We'll go right up to the Council House. Martin Cain's house, it was, and Lana lives there now," the old pirate told the three. His rheumy eyes glistened. "I want to see the faces of some of these young milksop captains when they learn that I've brought in the Three Planeteers!"

They went with Stilicho Keene across the field and through the main street of the straggling pirate town.

Turkoon Town sprawled, unkempt and somnolent, in the pale wash of light from the shrunken, setting sun. The looming dark green wall of the jungle was only rods from the outermost metal cabins.

Solemn, green and dark towered the fifty-foot jungle all around. Colossal ferns crowded each other, the space between their huge trunks choked with underbrush. Here and there in the tangle blindly writhed "crawler vines," parasitic fungoid creepers that wandered with their peculiar power of self-locomotion, searching for a host. Through the upper jungle and out over the town drifted "floating flow-

ers," white blooms that drank sunlight and water vapor from the air, and never touched ground after they budded free.

Thorn and his two comrades were eyed without interest by the motley population of the town—a population as varied in origin as the pirate crew they had already met. The men were from every inhabited world in the system. And there were also many women here—hot-eyed red Martian girls, languid white Venusian women, tall, awkward green girls from Saturn, brazen-faced Earth girls. All were clad in incongruously rich tunics and jewels—pirate loot.

CHILDREN, hybrids of a half-dozen different peoples, fought and chased each other along the dusty brown street. And there was an astounding variety of animals from all planets, some chained, others running free. Solemn-eyed, furry Martian *vardaks*, green Venusian swamp-pups, a big, hopping uniped from Io, and many others—all of them brought home here by the far-ranging pirate crews.

The crew of the *Venture* was stumping into town behind them, calling loudly to let all know they had returned. But by now Stilicho Keene had brought the Planeteers to the long, low chromaloy building that faced the end of the main street.

The snow-haired old pirate painfully climbed the steps, and led them into a big, low-ceilinged, dusky room. A small group of men stood in it, all wearing atom-pistols.

"Where's Lana?" demanded the old pirate as this little group turned toward him.

"We're waiting for her. She'll be out in a moment," answered a squat, scarred-faced Jovian who was one of the group. "So you finally got back, Stilicho?"

"Yes, I'm back," shrilled the ancient Martian. "And a cursed strange thing it is that old Stilicho Keene has to go out on reconnaissance while you younger men rest your bones."

The old pirate spat *rial* juice viciously out the open door and then turned to Thorn and his two comrades.

"Boy, I hate to admit it, but these are the captains of the Companions now," he told Thorn. "Aye, these are the worthless lot who call themselves pirates in these degenerate days. Yon ox of a Jovian is Brun Abo. The pretty fellow beside him is Kinnel King, and the fat hog yonder is Jenk Cheerly, the latest to join our ranks."

Thorn's black eyes swept the pirate leaders. The man beside the Jovian, the man called Kinnel King, was an Earthman, middle-aged, with a very handsome face and brooding eyes.

Jenk Cheerly, the third pirate captain, was a Uranian of incredible obesity. His fat, puffy body seemed about to burst his jacket, and his pale-green, rotund face was featureless except for two bright, piglike little eyes.

The obese Uranian stared at Thorn and his two comrades with those little eyes, and then spoke in an incongruously high and squeaky voice to old Stilicho Keene.

"Where did you pick up these three?" he asked. "And why did you bring them here?"

Stilicho Keene cackled, his rheumy eyes glistening.

"You'll find out who they are in a minute, Jenk," he shrilled. "It's going to be a surprise for you, and all you other louts who call yourselves pirates."

A door in the rear of the room suddenly opened, and a girl in white silk jacket and trousers entered the room.

"You're back, Stilicho?" she exclaimed eagerly as she saw the old Martian. "What did you learn at Jupiter?"

Thorn's gaze riveted on the girl. He heard a low whisper from Sual Av behind him.

"So *that's* Lana Cain," whispered the Venusian.

Lana Cain's eyes looked past the old Martian into Thorn's face. He felt the impact of her challenging stare as though it were a tangible shock.

THE pirate girl was a slender, imperious figure in her silk garments. Her proud, graceful form

seemed somehow vibrant with force. The bronze-gold hair that hung to her shoulders was like a casque of dull gold flame around her face, catching little glints of sunlight in its strands.

Her face was white, dynamic, with hardness in the straight red mouth and in the stubborn set of her small chin. Her dark blue eyes, as they stared into Thorn's face, were growing slowly darker, as though storm were gathering in them, tiny lightnings seeming to flash in their depths.

Thorn was momentarily bewildered, badly startled. He had expected some blowsy, barbaric, aging wench, whom he could without difficulty trick out of the secret he wanted. But this girl was as beautiful—and as dangerous-looking—as a sword-blade.

Lana Cain

CHAPTER V

Secret Enemy

IN the queerly tense silence Thorn stared at Lana Caln. Then the silence was suddenly broken by the shuffling entrance of a grotesque, four-legged creature that had followed the pirate girl into the room. It stared at Thorn with blazing green eyes.

"It's a space-dog, John!" exclaimed Snal Av wonderingly. "You've heard of them."

"I've heard of them," Thorn muttered. "But this is the first one I've ever seen."

The space-dog stood three feet high at the shoulder. Its body was of dusty, mineraline gray flesh that had an inorganic look. Its four legs ended in heavy digging paws, and its mouth was furnished with great grinding tusks. It had no nostrils, for the creature was not an air-breathing animal.

It was, in fact, one of a unique species. The early explorers who first visited the asteroid Ceres had been amazed to find these creatures living on that airless little world. They were product of an evolution working without atmosphere, creatures able to assimilate the inorganic elements they dug from the ground, and consume them by a chemical process other than oxidization. They had dim telepathic powers by which their rudimentary minda communed.

"Ool will not hurt you," said Lana Cain crisply to Thorn.

She glanced at the blazlng-eyed creature, and it lay down at her feet as it received her telepathic command.

"Stilicho, you brought these three men here?" the girl asked the old Martian. "Who are they?"

"Yes, who are they?" squeaked Jenk Cheerly, the obese, beady-eyed Uranian. "What's all the mystery about them?"

Stilicho Keene's rheumy eyes glistened, and his wrinkled face quivered with excitement as he answered.

"Why, they're just three lads I picked off a wreck coming back, and fetched along to Turkoon," he quavered. The old man paused to enjoy his coming triumph, then added, "Maybe you've heard of these three boys. They're called the Three Planeteers."

"The Three Planeteers!"

Brun Abo, the squat Jovian, uttered that startled cry. He and everyone else in the room stared at John Thorn and Sual Av and Gunner Welk in rig-

idly frozen amazement.

The beady eyes of Jenk Cheerly, the fat Uranian, were wide with astonishment. Kinnel King, the Earthman, stiffened. And Lana Cain's dark blue eyes narrowed incredulously as she stared at Thorn's dark face.

"It's them, all right," muttered the Jovian in a moment. "I've seen their pictures on reward notices."

"Those pictures on the notices were poor likenesses," said Sual Av, a grin on his froglike face. "They hardly did me justice, as you can see for yourselves."

"What do you Planeteers want here, if you *are* the Planeteers?" demanded Jenk Cheerly suspiciously.

Gunner Welk stiffened at the fat green pirate's question.

"We're not in tbe custom of asking anybody's leave for our coming and goings, Uranian!" be flared.

"Not even the Planeteers can talk to me like tbat!" squeaked Jenk Cheerly furiously, his hand dropping to his side.

"Draw that atom-pistol, and I'll shove it down your fat throat," warned the towering Mercurian ominously.

"Quiet, Gunner," snapped John Thorn. "I'll do the talking."

"Let them fight!" urged old Stilicho Keene with quavering eagerness, a ghoulish avidity in his rheumy eyes as he leaned forward. "There's nothing to warm the blood like the sight of two good men in a stand-up figbt."

"There'll be no fighting here!" flared Lana Cain. "You all know my rules! If any of you doesn't like them he can get out of Turkoon and out of the Zone!"

THE girl's voice cracked like a silver whip, and her dark blue eyes were stormy now with little lightnings. The space-dog, Ool, had sprung to his feet, his great green eyes blazing.

Thorn sensed the electric force in this girl which had kept her the acknowledged leader of the wild Companions of Space. The others in the room were stricken to sullen silence by it.

Lana's stormy eyes swung back to Thorn.

"Jenk's question was a fair one, John Thorn," she declared. "What are you Planeteers doing here? You never came into the Zone before—you always worked by yourselves."

Thorn shrugged. "We didn't come here by choice. Perhaps you heard of the trouble we got into at Earth?"

"We heard of your attempt to kidnap the Chairman there," Lana nodded curtly. "Go on."

"We bungled the job and had to run for it with half the Earth Navy on our tail," Thorn continued coolly. "We tried to lose them in a swarm and got wrecked. The old Martian there picked us up and brought us here to Turkoon. It's not a place we'd have picked voluntarily."

Lana stiffened, and asked dangerously, "You don't think much then of we Companions and our ways?"

"Not much," Thorn answered coolly. "I've no doubt your followers are good fighters, but they look like rather an undisciplined rabble."

Thorn was playing his part to the hilt. He knew well that for the famous Planeteers to seem too friendly on first acquaintance, too eager to join the pirates, would quickly arouse suspicion.

"But, boy, I was hoping that you three would join up with us!" quavered old Stilicho Keene dismayedly.

"The Planeteers work alone," Thorn declared frowningly. Then he appeared to hesitate, and added, "It's true that we're stranded here now without a sbip—"

Sual Av instantly played up to him. "Yes, John, we need a ship and equipment. Maybe we could work with these people for a while, and take a new cruiser as our share of loot."

"You haven't been asked to join the Companions yet," flared Lana Cain. "You Planeteers are just three men here. I could order you gunned down and it would be done."

John Thorn looked at her steadily witb cool black eyes. "Would you do that?"

"No, I wouldn't," she admitted after a moment. "Turkoon is a refuge for

every outlaw who comes into the Zone, as long as he obeys my rules. And I don't countenance killing here."

Thorn smiled. "After all, we Planeteers are in no position to be choosers. We nsed a ship. We'll join up with you for a while, if you're agreeable, snd take a ship as our shsre of spoil, and then be on our way. Wbat do you say?"

Lans frowned in thought, her anger gone. "We do need captsins," she murmured.

"And where will you find hetter ones than the Planeteers?" cried old Stilicho Keene with shrill eagerness. "Take them in, lass—it's heavsn sent them here to help us in the hig new foray we've planned."

"We can pull that job without their help," squeaked Jenk Cheerly, his piglike eyes malignant. "What do we need with the Pianeteers?"

BRUN ABO, the squat Jovian, nodded sullsn agresment. But Kinnel King, the handsome Earthman, turned on the ohese Uranian.

"After all, Jenk," said Kinnel King silkily, "you yourself are still a newcomer in our midst. We don't need advice from you on this."

"No hrawling!" Lana ordered imperiously. She continued, "John Thorn, *I'm* taking you thres into the Companions. But understand one thing—when we blast off Turkoon, everyone *is* under *my* command, even the Planeteers."

Thorn frowned, though inwardly bis heart was pounding with elation.

"We're not used to heing under orders of anyone," he declared.

"Take it or leave lt!" Lans fisshed. "There can only be one leader when ships go into action."

Tborn finally shrugged. "Well, as I said, we're not in a position to he choosers. We follow your orders in space."

"That's settled, then," Lana said curtly. Her slender figure swung round to Stilicho Keene. "Now what about your reconnaissance, Stilicho? Did you find out anything at Jupiter ahout those scheduled freighters?"

The old Martian nodded his white head vigorously. "Sure did. We alipped in to Jupiter without bein' spotted, and landed sscretly in thst big marsh near Vosek. Me and one of my boys wsnt into the city in disguise and hung around the docks. We saw rich cargo hein' loaded in them frsighters—thirty of 'em. We waited till they took off, a bunch of tankers with 'em. They're blasting along without any naval convoy. I figger them to cross undsr the Zone tomorrow, on their wsy to Ssturn."

"Didn't I tell you they'd sail without convoy?" squeaked Jenk Cheerly, the obese Uranian's eyes glistening. "Wasn't my tip right? This'll bs a rich hsul, and without even a fight."

Lana Cain turned to Thorn and his two comrades and explained crisply.

"Jenk just joined us two weeks ago. He came with his ship from Jupiter, where he had a secret base on one of tbe outer moons. He brought advance notice of these rich Jovian freighters scheduled to transit across the inner orhits of ths system to reach Saturn which is now approaching opposition.

"They're without convoy," tbe pirate girl eontinued rapidly, "because tbe League of Cold Worlds is concentrating all its cruisers at Saturn right now, preparing for the great attack they're going to make on the Alliance. I sent Stilicho to check their sailing and make sure they had rich cargo. *We'll surprise them tomorrow when* they pass under the Zone."

"Yes, and fine loot there'll he to divide," squeaked the obese Uranian gloatingly. "We'll gun them to a wreck, and gut them of every scrsp of spoil, and leave not a man alive on them to taks the tale to Saturn."

"No!" exclaimed Lana hotly. "No massacre! I told you my rules when you joined us, Jenk. The Companions willfully spill no blood as long as *I* lead tbem!"

"My rule has always heen to leave nohody alive to testify against me in a space-court," grumbled the fat Uranian shrilly. "This tender-heartedness—"

"It isn't just tender-hsartedness; it's good stategy!" flashed Lana Cain,

her blue eyes determined. "When freighter-men *know* they're going to be massacred if they surrender, they fight to the last man. But when they know that only their cargo will be taken, and their lives spared, they surrender a lot more quickly. Furtber, the hunt against us is never so bitter. It was my fatber's rule to take no life, and it's mine, and it's paid returns to the Companions."

"That it bas!" declared Brun Abo, the Jovian, "It's saved us many a bitter figbt—and possibly extermination."

THE girl looked around them as sbe gave her orders.

"Our chief spatial navigator will check their course against Saturn's—and ours. We'll blast off tomorrow dawn, with forty ships. That'll give us time enough to be waiting in the Zone, and when the Jovian freighters pass underneath, we'll swoop down on tbem."

"What about Gunner and Sual Av and me?" John Thorn asked her. "We have no ship, remember."

"You'll be furnished one, and a crew to go with it," Lana answered crisply. "From what I've heard of you Planeteers, you'll be able to handle your part."

She ran her hand a little tiredly through her mop of dull-gold hair.

"That's all, men. See that your ships and men are ready to blast off at dawn. And not too much drinking tonight!"

As the pirate captains started to troop out, the girl added to the old Martian, "Stilicho, find a cabin for the Planeteers."

Thorn was starting out with his two comrades after the old pirate, when Lana's voice halted him.

"Wait, John Thorn. There's something I want to ask you."

Thorn turned, surprised. The girl was looking at him with a queerly thoughtful expression in her blue eyes, her small hand idly patting tbe space-dog that had risen beside her.

"You were in the Earth Navy before you became an outlaw, weren't you?" she asked him.

Thorn nodded. "Until I deserted," he admitted curtly.

Lana pointed up to a picture on the wall, a portrait of a hard-faced, middle-aged man with piercing eyes.

"My fatber, Martin Cain, was an officer in the Eartb Navy, too, before be became an outlaw," sbe said slowly. "Do they ever speak of my father on Earth? What do they say of bim?"

Thorn told her the truth. "They speak of bim only as notorious pirate. Few remember be was ever a naval man."

"But he was, and one of their best officers," Lana said bitterly. "It was tbe jealousy of other officers over his promotions that formed a cabal which had him dishonorably discbarged. Tbat was the reward of Earth for all the service he'd given bis native planet."

"You don't think much of Earth, eh?" Thorn said curiously. "Yet, after all, it's really your native world."

"The Zone is *my* world—I was born here. I bate Earth for what it did to my father!" the girl flasbed. "I'll be glad to see the League smash the inner worlds, for though I hate the League and its dictator, I've an even greater hate for Earth!"

Thorn felt a faint bope he had cberished until now die within bim. He had hoped that the pirate girl might be induced to save Earth from conquest by telling him the secret of Erebus. But he saw now futile had been that slight hope. This girl had only bitter batred for the world she deemed to have wronged her fatber.

"Your father was an extraordinary man," Thorn mused, looking up at the portrait. "A great fighter and organizer, a wonderful navigator. They say that he even visited Erebus, the tenth world, though I suppose that's just a baseless legend."

"It's the truth!" Lana declared proudly. "My father was on Erebus two weeks, and came back safely—the only man in the whole history of the Solar System that ever did so."

John Thorn stared incredulously. "How did he do it? How did he avoid whatever peril there has swallowed so many men?"

Soft gray flesh stretched and snapped, and instead of one slith, two of the beasts were charging (Chap. X)

"I CAN'T tell you that," the girl said slowly. "I've never told anybody what my father told me about Erebus."

"Then," Thorn said wonderingly, "you're the only person in the whole system who knows anything about that mystery world? The only person who knows how it might be visited safely?"

The girl nodded slowly. A queer expression, one of somber, haunting memory, had come into her vital blue eyes.

"Yes, I'm the only one who knows the secret of Erebus," she admitted. "And nobody will ever learn it from me. I have reasons for keeping silence about that world!"

She trembled slightly. Thorn, watching her tautly, felt a queer chill as of a cold, alien breath in the room.

"But I do not know why I am talking of Erebus," she said impatiently. "I am tired. I shall see you tomorrow at dawn, before our ships blast off."

Thus dismissed, Thorn left the Council House and walked slowly, deep in thought, down the street of Turkoon Town. The sun was setting, and from the little crimson disk a flood of pale red light uncannily illuminated the dark, surrounding fern-jungle, the raw field and parked ships, and the straggling metal town.

He found the metal cabin assigned them. Gunner Welk and Sual Av sprang up eagerly as he entered.

"We've made it so far, John!" ex-

claimed the bald Venusian excitedly. "We're in with the pirates now, at least. Did you find out anything about Erebus from the girl?"

Thorn shook his head. "She won't talk about Erebus—she seems almost afraid to. I didn't dare press questions."

"We can't wait forever to get the secret out of her," rumbled Gunner Welk warningly. "Even when we get it, it'll take a lot of time to get out to Erebus and lift the radite, remember."

"I know," Thorn muttered. "But we'll ruin all our chances if we're too rash now."

He fished in his pocket for a *rial* cigarette.

"It's possible," he said, "that whatever her father told her about Erebus—"

Thorn stopped speaking. His face froze as he pulled out the thing he had felt in his pocket. It was a tiny metal sphere, only a half-inch in diameter, with a minute aperture in it.

"An Ear!" exclaimed Sual Av appalledly.

Thorn dropped the thing like a poisonous snake and ground it under his heel. His dark face was grim as he looked down at the shattered fragments of the Ear.

The thing was a super-compact and super-sensitive audio transmitter. It picked up all sound in its immediate vicinity and broadcast it electro-magnetically, for a short range. Both police and criminals of the system used Ears for eavesdropping at a distance.

"Someone slipped it into my pocket in the Council House!" Thorn rapped. "See if there are any more."

But a swift search of their clothing and of the cabin disclosed no more Ears.

"Whoever put that Ear in my pocket suspects us!" Thorn said grimly. "And whoever it is knows now from our talk that we came here after the secret of Erebus, that we're after the radite!

"Thank heaven," he added tightly, "that we didn't give away the fact that we want the radite for Earth, that we're Earth agents."

"This is bad, John," said Sual Av, his ugly face sober. "Who do you think suspects us? Lana Cain herself?"

"If it were she, or someone loyal to her," rumbled Gunner Welk, "she'd have sent men here to seize us by now."

"Gunner's right—it can't be Lana," muttered Thorn. "Someone here is playing a deep game of his own. And whoever it is doesn't like us, and knows now just what we're here for."

"John, our hidden enemy will have a fine chance to gun us tomorrow in the confusion of this attack on the Jovian freighters," warned Sual Av.

Thorn's brown face hardened. "I know. But we have to keep right on playing our part here, until we get the secret. We've got to take our part in the foray, and keep looking out for trouble."

CHAPTER VI

The Trap

FORTY pirate ships throbbed steadily through the wilderness of the Zone. Their course through the jungle of swarms and debris was sunwise. The six basic directions in space navigation are sunwise and counter-sunwise—that is, in the same direction as the rotation of the sun or in an opposite direction; sunward and outward—that is, toward or away from the sun; and up or down, from the equatorial plane of the Solar System as plotted by the fixed stars.

The pirate fleet moved in a close formation of short columns. In the lead was Lana Cain's silvery cruiser, the *Lightning*. The ship that had been given the Planeteers to command, the *Cauphul*, was close behind her. On one side of them sailed old Stilicho Keene's cruiser, and on the other the ship of Jenk Cheerly, which was marked on the bows with an ominous, painted black skull.

John Thorn stared through the glassite window of the control-room, as they throbbed on. In the pilot's

chair beside bim sat Sual Av.

"I don't like this raid," the Venusian was saying, his ugly face troubled. "An attack on peaceful freighters—it's out of our line, John."

"Nobody on those freighters will be killed," Thorn reassured him. "You heard Lana's orders. And we've got to belp rob those ships, to keep up the part we're playing here. We've got to do *anything* until we get that secret out of the girl. And they are not Alliance craft."

"I still can't see how we can get it from ber," muttered Sual Av, his green eyes thoughtful. "We can't use force, when she's surrounded by hundreds of her men all the time. She doesn't look the kind who can be tricked. And from what you said, she'll never tell it to you of her own free will."

"We'll find a way," Thorn declared tightly. "But I wish I knew who planted that Ear on me, and what his game is."

Thorn watched the wilderness of meteor swarms, cross-orbiting planetoids, and occasional stray comets past which they sailed. There was no need for navigating by the wave-code, with Lana's cruiser leading the way.

Finally the silvery torpedo-shape of the *Lightning* slowed down and stopped. At once all the other pirate ships responded with a blast of fire from their bow tubes, braking themselves.

Thorn looked out. They were lying low in tbe Zone, close by a meteor-swarm whose myriad masses of stone showed very near their sbips in the aura-chart. They had reacbed the point under which the Jovian freighters would soon pass, when they detoured downward under the Zone as all ordinary shipping did.

Thorn spoke into the interphone connecting the ship's divisions.

"Gunner, are you cleared for action down there?"

Gunner Welk's rumbling voice came through the instrument from the gun-decks where the mighty Mercurian had taken command.

"All ready! Every man's at his post."

"On space-suits, everybody," Thorn ordered sharply. "Then stand by."

It was customary before an action in space for all the crew of a ship to don their suits, so that in case their hull was torn open they could continue to work and fight the ship until there was time to make repairs.

Thorn and Sual Av put on their own suits and helmets. Then they waited in silence, tbeir ship floating beside the others. Lana Cain had strictly forbidden use of the audio between ships until the attack opened, lest the freighters be given tbe alarm.

THORN peered through the eyepiece of the telescope built into the wall between the broad windows. He could see no sign of the freigbters sunward, and his eyes tired.

A little later, Sual Av gripped his arm and pointed ahead at Lana's ship.

"Tbe signal, Jobn! They're coming!"

Lana's silvery cruiser had emitted three short flasbes of fire from its bow and stern tubes, the agreed signal.

Thorn peered again tbrougb the 'scope. Now he saw the coming freighters, far down and sunward. They were coming straight on, and would pass the Zone directly underneath the pirates.

There were thirty big freighters, and lagging after them came forty tankers of the type used for transporting liquefied gases, broad-beamed and very dumpy ships. Thorn's keen eyes searched space for sign of a naval convoy, but found none.

"Those are the dumpiest tankers I've ever seen," he muttered. "It's a wonder that freighters running without convoy would take such old tubs along to hold their speed down."

Sual Av shrugged. "The League worlds are pressing every old ship they've got into service, in their preparation for war. Anyway," he grinned, "these pirates aren't going to botber the tankers."

The merchantmen came steadily on, and now the freighters that led were directly underneath the part of the Zone in wbich the pirate fleet hovered. Thorn knew the aura-charts of

the freigbters would show the pirate ships only as part of the great meteor swarm they were lying near. That was why Lana had chosen the position.

Thorn's nerves tensed as the Jovian freighters came directly underneath, a little flock of gleaming specks swimming on througb hlack space toward distant Saturn, the slow tsnkers still lagging hehind. Sual Av was leaning tensely over his bank of keys, and there was no sound in the ship exeept the throb of its power chambers.

Abruptly from the audio-speaker fisred Lana Cain's sllver voice.

"Attack! Dive on them!"

Forty pirate ships streamed blasting white fire from their stern tubes, forty grim torpedolike shapes roared down through the spatial vsult toward the thirty hapisss freighters.

As thsy awooped, tbe forty corsair craft split into five divisions of eight ships each. The elght led by the flashing cruiser of the Three Planeteers headed toward the sunwise end of the freighters. Jenk Cheerly and his division headed for the counter-sunwise end. Kinnel King for the sunward and Brun Abo for the outward sides. Lana Cain herself, with Stilicho Keene's ship and six otbers, cometed down below the merchantmen.

John Thorn saw that the swift maneuver had succeeded. The frelghters were "boxed"—hemmed in on every side except the upward one, which was closed by the dreaded Zone. The piratea had not included the worthless, lagging tankers in their trap, and those dumpy ships were still coming bewilderedly on.

The freighters, as the corsairs swooped down around them, milled confusedly with blasts from their bow-tubes braking them, seeking to find a way out of the trap. The few atom-guns with whieh tbey were armed apat shells frantically, that exploded in blinding flares of atomic energy.

"Ahoy, freigbters!" rang Lana's silvery voice from the audio. "Cease firing or we'll gun you out of space! Surrender and nobody will be harmed!"

"How do we know you'll keep your promise?" eame the hoarse, fear-lsden voice of the freight squadron commander.

"This is Lana Cain speaking!" answered tbe girl's voice instantly. "I keep my promises."

A MOMENT'S silence. The scattered fire from the trapped freighters suddenly stopped.

Ths freight commander's answer came. "You've tbe reputation of not killing. We'll surrender."

Sual Av, his green eyes gleaming with excitement through his helmet, glanced swiftly at John Thorn.

"The girl's policy of mercy does pay dividends, John," he muttered.

"Stand by to hoard the freighters!" crackled Lana's voice to her pirate followers. "Two ships in eaeb division stand off to keep watcb. Hnrry, men!"

Like sharks eager for prey, tbirty of the forty pirate cruisers one to each victim, dashed in at the helpless freighters. The lead-ship of each division, with one other, stood by ready to turn its guns on any freighter that might resist the boarding.

Thorn's eruiser, the *Cauphul*, was one of those that stood off to keep watch. He saw the pirate ships already hooking onto the freighters by means of the magnetic grapples they shot forth. The grapple-lines were winched in swiftly, the pirate and merchant ships were drawn close together, and the flexihle metal catwalks run swiftly out between them by the corsairs. Then the space-suited pirate horde was pouring across the short, swaying catwalks, hammering at the doors of the freighters until they opened.

Back across the precarious catwalks staggered ths helmeted pirates, laden with bales and cases, sacks of valuable minerals, bars of rare metals, crates of silks and wines and foods.

"Why can't we be in on this?" demanded Sual Av, twitching with exeitement. "There's no fun to lying off bere watching the others."

"It's Lana's orders," reminded John Thorn. "And we Planeteers agreed to take her orders when we were in space."

Thorn looked sunward, and frowned. "Why the devil haven't those tankers run for it? The fools are blundering right on."

The forty tubby tankers that had been laboriously trailing the freighters in space were coming stupidly on to the scene of the bold-up, as though unable to realize what was happening. They were now quite close.

Thorn's brain suddenly sounded an alarm, as he stared at the oncoming tankers. His eyes, trained by long naval experience, saw something queer about the lines of those dumpy ships, something—

He leaped to the audio. "Lana, those tankers are disguised naval cruisers!" he yelled. "They're—"

His warning was too late. At the very moment Thorn shouted, the forty "tankers" were unmasking.

Their bulging sides suddenly fell away. Those sides had been only a skin of thin metal plates. Their disappearance exposed the ships, not as tankers, but as sleek, grim-lined naval cruisers with batteries of heavy atom-guns all along their sides, and with the four interlaced circles of the League of Cold Worlds on their bows.

Instantly the unmasked League cruisers shot forward. Their rocket-tubes burst fire, and from their batteries hailed a storm of deadly shells that burst in blinding lightning-flares among the startled pirate ships.

THE trap had been perfectly sprung. The League cruisers, lagging behind in the guise of slow tankers, had waited until the pirate ships were hooked onto the freighters by grapples and catwalks, their crews engaged in looting. Then they had thrown off their disguise and leaped in on the Companions' ships.

"Cut away!" cried Lana Cain's voice from the audio. "It's a trap! Cut loose and break for the Zone!"

Thorn saw her silvery cruiser leap forward to engage the rushing League battleships, to try to hold them back while the pirates engaged in looting could cut away from the freighters.

Loyally, old Stilicho Keene's long black cruiser, and four or five others dashed forward with the pirate girl's silver ship. And Thorn's cruiser was one of those that followed her, for Thorn had yelled the order to Sual Av.

Blinding, dazzling flares of bursting atom-shells from the League cruisers seared space around Thorn's ship. Sual Av was following Lana's lead right into the forefront of the formidable League battle-squadron.

"Drive in to cover Lana's ship!" Thorn cried to the Vennsian. "If they get her, everything's ruined for us!"

He yelled into the interphone. "Let go with all batteries to starboard, Gunner!"

The *Cauphul* shook to the roar of its straining rocket-tubes and the thudding thunder of its atom-guns going off as Sual Av flung the ship in beside Lana's silvery cruiser.

The very madness of the wild counter-attack of the little handful of pirate ships, as they dashed fiercely at the League cruisers, seemed momentarily to disconcert the latter. Precious moments were gained in which the main body of the pirate fleet was hastily cutting away from the freighters they had grappled.

Thorn was wild with anxiety for Lana Cain. If anything happened to the girl, if the mysterious secret of Erebus died with her—

The League cruisers had not concentrated any fire upon her silver ship yet. They were pouring shells upon the other pirate craft, including Thorn's, but Lana's had escaped fire even though she had her batteries streaming shells forth.

Thorn was thrown from his feet as a salvo of blinding bursts rocked the *Cauphul*. He heard the scream of escaping air below, the slam of automatic doors as he staggered up.

"They've got Lana's ship!" Sual Av shouted hoarsely. "Look!"

Thorn's heart plummeted as he saw through the fight. A League cruiser had got its magnetic grapples onto Lana Cain's silver ship, and was drawing it closer. It had grappled her craft by its keel, so that she was unable to use her guns.

"They've got my ship, Companions!" stabbed the pirate girl's voice, clear and unafraid, from the audio. "You can't save me—break for the Zone while you have the chance!"

"If we don't do as she says," cried Sual Av tensely, "we'll be gunned to a wreck. But if we leave her—"

"We can't leave her!" John Thorn exclaimed fiercely. "Our plan for the Alliance depends on her!"

CHAPTER VII

Shadow of the League

JOHN THORN'S ship rocked wildly as another shell struck it. The shells of all atom-guns contained a charge of powdered metal whose atoms had been brought to a critical point of instability. When an electric charge stored in the shell was released, either by impact or a timer, it detonated the unstable atoms into a destroying flare of atomic energy. These deadly shells were fired from guns and pistols by the push of an electro-solenoid built into the barrel.

Red lights flashing on and off in the panel in front of him warned Thorn that already a half dozen compartments of the *Cauphul* had been holed and had lost their air. Down below, Gunner Welk was still keeping his crew batteries going, pouring shell out on the encircling League cruisers, but at any moment a hit on their rocket-tubes or power-chambers might disable them entirely.

Thorn's mind was crazy with worry for the fate of Lana Cain. The League cruiser that had hooked its magnetic grapples on the keel of her ship was still winching her helpless craft closer. The capture or killing of the pirate girl meant the collapse of his great plan, and the probable ruin of the four inner worlds.

"We've got to free Lana's ship!" he cried to Sual Av over the thudding of guns. "There's only one way—drive our ship between hers and the one that's hooked her—break the grapple-lines!"

Sual Av's green eyes widened startledly inside his glassite helmet. Then the bald Venusian laughed recklessly.

"All right—here goes, John! Hold tight!"

"Cease firing!" Thorn yelled into the interphone to Gunner Welk at the same moment.

Sual Av's fingers smashed down on firing keys. The *Cauphul* jumped forward in space, a raving torrent of energy streaming from her stern tubes.

The Venusian drove the ship straight toward the two craft ahead, the League cruiser and the *Lightning*. The half-dozen grapple-lines had been now so far drawn in that there was not enough room for a third ship to pass between the two.

But Sual Av steered the hurtling *Cauphul* between the two, anyway. Space around them seemed blazing with continuons flares of hursting atom-shells.

Crash! The grinding shock that flung Thorn to the floor of the control-room seemed to him the end of everything. The *Cauphul,* rushing in between the *Lightning* and the League cruiser grappling it, sideswiped both ships with stunning force.

Thorn tried to clutch a stanchion and pull himself up, as the control-room rocked wildly around him. He heard the triumphant shout of the bald Venusian clinging to the control-panel.

"We're through, John! We did it!"

Thorn's ship had crashed in between the other two, forcing its way through and breaking the grapple lines.

"Blast away, Lana!" yelled Thorn into the audio. "You're clear now!"

Like a streak of light, the silvery cruiser of the pirate girl shot upward. And with it cometed the battered *Cauphul,* and old Stilicho Keene's black ship. The other pirate craft that had tried to help Lana counter-attack the League cruisers had been riddled to helpless wrecks by the heavy fire of the enemy.

But the main body of the pirate fleet had had time to cut away from their prey during the few minutes of

the furious fight below. They were shooting out like startled hawks of space, joining Lana Cain's cruiser and the other two as they sped upward.

"Up to the Zone!" pealed the girl's voice from the audio.

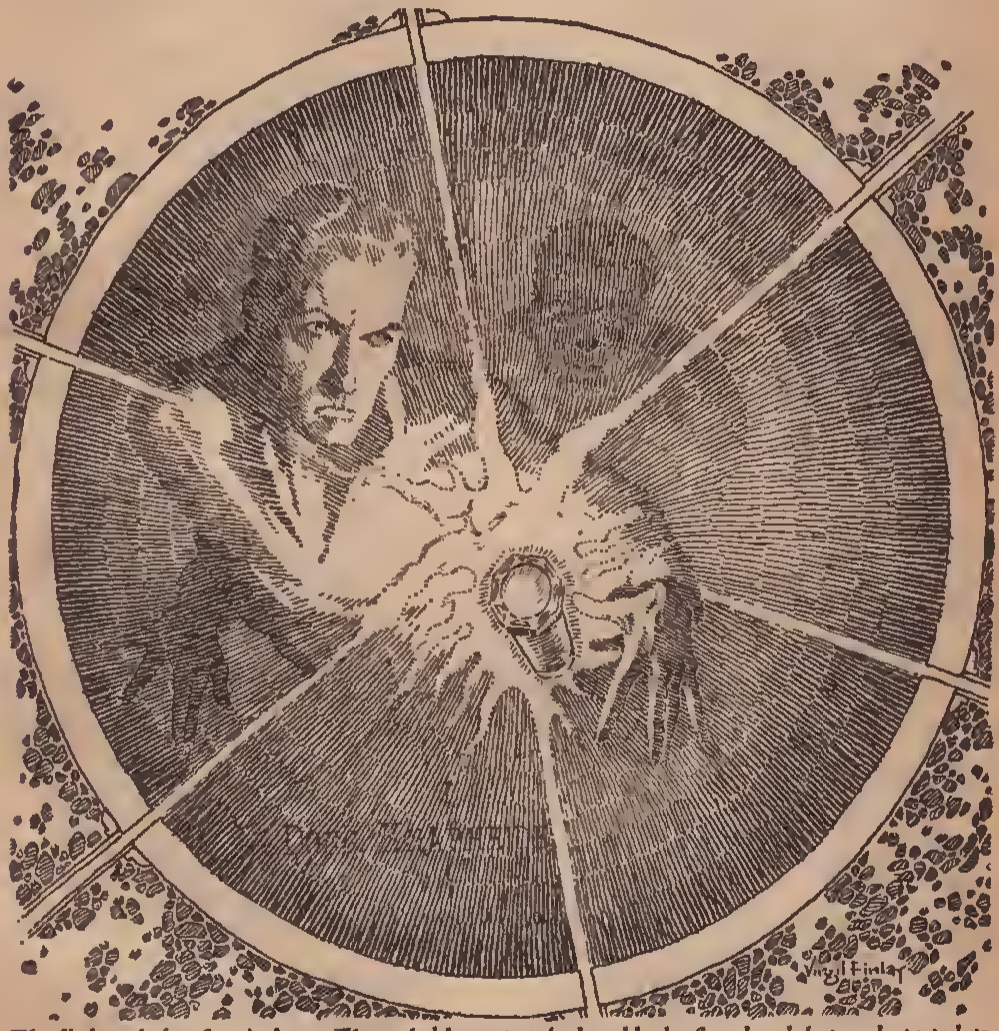
MASSING together as they roared through space, the pirate ships streaked upward through the vault. Hot after them raced the League cruisers, which now outnumbered the pirates.

"What in the devil's name's going on?" roared Gunner Welk's voice. "That crash strained our sides—it looks down here as though the ship will crumple any minute!"

"If we can get into the Zone, we can lose those cruisers," Sual Av was muttering. "If she'll just keep going until then!"

Thorn could hear the *Cauphul* groaning and creaking heneath the fierce thrust of her hlazing rocket-tuhes. The hull of the ship, weakened hy shell-fire and badly strained hy the side-swiping collision, threatened to crumple up without notice.

The pirate ships could not match the heavily armed League cruisers in fire-power. But one thing the ships of the Companions of Space did have, and that was speed. They were draw-



The little tubular fluoric lamp Thorn held outstretched suddenly flared red hot and started to melt (Chap. XI)

ing slowly away from the hotly pursuing cruisers as they rushed upward.

It was a wild yet thrilling scene to John Thorn's eyes! The hlack vault of ahysmal space around them tapestried with countless hlazing stars, the hlinding flares of atom-shells hursting like exploding lightning, the raving flame of proton-fire from pursued and pursuing ships, and the vast, vague cloud of light-flecks of the Zone stretching ahove.

They were thundering up into the Zone how, Lana Cain's silver ship leading, curving sharply to avoid the meteor-swarm directly ahove. But the League cruisers were pursuing them into the vast wilderness of debris.

"Scatter!" came the girl's sharp order from the audio. "We'll rendezvous at Turkoon!"

"That finishes us, John," said Sual Av hitterly. "We don't know the wave code. We can't navigate tbis damned jungle."

But hard on the heels of his words came a quick call from the girl.

"Planeteers! Keep your ship with mine!"

The pirate ships scattered in all directions, like a frightened flock of wild fowl. Darting away through the swarms and planetoids, navigating hy means of the coded wave-signals from the projectors on every swarm and asteroid, they melted away.

The League fleet could not hope to pursue all those diverging ships through the wilderness of debris in which they were perfectly at home. But a dozen League cruisers followed purposefully after Lana's silver sbip and the Planeteers' crippled craft as they raced away through the Zone in a counter-sunwise direction.

"Damn them, they must have recognized Lana's ship and they're determined to catch her!" Sual Av exclaimed.

Gunner Welk's towering space-suited figûre came thrusting hastily into the control-room.

"John, the compartment walls are cracking down there!" exclaimed the Mercurian. "If they—"

A thunderous explosion from below interrupted his words. Instantly, the *Cauphul's* acceleration decreased, the roar of its rocket-tubes sharply diminished.

"One power - chamber has exploded!" yelled an engineer's voice from the interphone.

"We're sunk!" the hig Mercurian cried.

"No—Lana's coming around!" John Thorn exclaimed.

THEY had heen rushing close to the coast of a far-flung swarm, with the pirate girl's silver ship just ahead, the League cruisers a fair distance hehind, when the explosion had occurred. Now the silvery *Lightning* was darting back around to tbeir side.

"I'm standing hy to take you on!" Lana cried from the audio-speaker. "Hurry!"

"Break open the portside door to abandon ship!" Thorn yelled into the interphone. "Cut the tubes, Sual, and come on!"

The Planeteers hastened down out of the control-room through the wrecked ship. The motley crew of the *Cauphul*, all in suits and helmets like the three comrades, had got the round door on the portside open. There was no air now in the whole ship, and its walls and heams were sagging and cracking ominously as it floated on in space under inertia.

Up to the side of the *Cauphul* drove the *Lightning*. There was no time to hook on with magnetic grapples or run out catwalks, for the League cruisers were coming up along the edge of the great meteor swarm in hot pursuit. The *Lightning's* starhoard door was open, the silvery ship keeping even with the wreck only a few yards away.

"Jump for it!" Thorn yelled to his crew. "Hurry!"

Across the gap hetween ships shot space-suited figures like human projectiles, leaping toward the hig open door of the *Lightning*. Those who missed the door grabbed lines that had heen flung out, and were hauled in like floundering fish.

There was a thundering crash of metal as a whole section of the *Caup-*

hul's stern collapsed. The wreck sagged drunkenly in space, and the League cruisers were racing closer.

"This is getting a little too hot for even the Planeteers!" laugbed Sual Av as he leaped.

Gunner Welk followed, and Jobn Thorn jumped last. He felt himself hurtle floatingly across the gap toward the open door of the *Lightning*, infinity below and above him. Then he hit the edge of the door and a hand grasped his arm and pulled him in.

Instantly the *Lightning* sprang forward with renewed acceleration as its stern tubes blasted. The door was ground shut.

Thorn and his two comrades climbed to the control-room. When he entered it, a glance showed him that they were now pulling steadily away from their pursuers.

Lana Cain, her slender figure bulky in space-suit and helmet, was leaning beside the Jovian pilot at the firing-keys. She was listening intently to the constant buzzing from the section of the panel that received the navigation wave-signals.

"Turn ninety degrees outward, and fifteen degrees upward, Rimil!" exclaimed the girl. "That'll take us between swarms where they won't follow for long."

The *Lightning* curved sharply, shot between the two vast clouds of dangerous debris.

LOOKING back through the rear window of the bulging control-room, Thorn saw two of the pursuing League cruisers glow red and fall out of line. They had been meteor-struck. Trying to cut across after their quarry without aid of the wave-code navigation signals, they bad blundered into the edge of one swarm.

The otber League ships slackened speed, and tried to grope their way ahead. But the *Lightning*, dashing on at full speed and tben changing course abruptly to cut up across a "family" of whirling planetoids, soon lost them from sight.

"Off suits. We're safe from them now!" Lana called into the interphone.

Thorn and his two comrades divested themselves with relief of tbeir suits and helmets, as the girl did likewise.

Lana turned toward the Planeteers. The girl's bronze-gold hair was tossed in disorder, her face flushed, her dark blue eyes blazing with excitement. There was something vital and dynamic about her, and there was a throbbing, eager emotion in her eyes as she faced Thorn, impulsively holding out ber hand.

"You Planeteers saved me down there!" she exclaimed. "If you hadn't rammed in between ships and broken those grapple-lines—"

John Thorn felt a queer sense of shame as her warm little hand grasped his. If she knew his real reason for taking such desperate chances to save her, he thought— But it was for four great worlds.

"I'll never forget this, John Thorn," Lana was saying earnestly.

"I'll never forget it, either," growled Gunner Welk, rubbing a bruised shoulder. "When we wedged between the two ships it nearly threw me right tbrougb a wall of the gun-deck."

Sual Av grinned ruefully. "I'm not so sure I want to be a raid pirate, if this kind of thing happens often."

"It was a cunning trap set for us Companions by the League navies," declared Lana. "They sven actually loaded tbose freighters with ricb cargo, knowing we'd have spies watching who would report that, and that we'd make an attack when we heard. And they had those cruisers disguised as tankers, ready to gun us as soon as we were busy looting tbe freighters."

Her blue eyes flashed. "But we escaped their trap! We didn't lose more than four of our ships, and we've got s good portion of the freigbters' cargoes—the cargoes that were to be the bait of the trap!"

"If old Stilicho Keene watched those freighters and tankers sail from Jupiter why didn't he suspect their game?" Thorn asked her keenly. "A close look at the tankers would have sbowed him that they were disguised cruisers."

Lana looked troubled. "I can't understand why Stilicho didn't see that." She added loyally, "But it can't be any

fault of his. And, anyway, we got out safely."

"If that League cruiser that grappled onto you had gunned you, it would have been the end of you," John Thorn told her. "I can't understand why they didn't when they had you helpless."

"Neither can I," Lana confessed. "They must have wanted to capture me, and take me to be tried and executed as a lesson to the whole system. If so, they overreached themselves!"

SHE turned to the Jovian pilot, and ordered, "Straigbt to Turkoon, now. There's no danger of more pursuit."

As the *Lightning* throbbed on through the Zone, homing toward the jungle asteroid like all the otber scattered pirate ships, John Thorn drew bis two comrades unobtrusively back down into the privacy of the narrow corridor below the control-room.

"There was something damned queer about that trap the League set!" Thorn declared. "Their whole object seemed to be to capture this ship—to capture Lana—and they took good care not to fire once at her craft, lest they kill her."

Sual Av stared, perplexed. "But why would the League set sucb an elaborate trap as that to capture her?"

"Why did we come here to seek out the girl?" Thorn countered meaningly. "Because she has a secret that we want."

Gunner Welk started. "You mean that the League may be after the secret of Erebus, too? That the League may be trying—"

"Trying to get that radite on Erebus, the same as we are?" Thorn finished. He frowned. "It's possible. Remember, we beard that the League planned some frightful new agent of destruction to use on tbe Alliance worlds, to beat them into submission after they smash our fleet. Maybe the radite has something to do with *that!*"

Sual Av's green eyes widened. "Then it might be a League agent who put that Ear in your pocket yesterday, who is working from inside the pirates as we are and belped plan this trap? But who is it? Brun Abo, or Jenk Cheerly, or old Stilicho, maybe?"

"Whichever it is, if a League agent is after the girl's secret, we've got to beat bim to it!" burst Gunner. "But bow?"

"She'll never tell me tbe secret, I'm sure of that, even though she feels grateful to me now," Thorn said, frowning. "But she may have written down what her father told her about Erebus. She may have the secret among her papers."

Sual Av's ugly face stiffened. "You mean to search her papers? John, it's too dangerous! If these pirates caught you—"

"I've got to take the chance," Tborn rapped. "With the League working against us, there's no time to lose now!"

CHAPTER VIII

Out of the Past

From Mercury to Pluto,
From Saturn back to Mars,
We'll fight and sail and blaze our trail
In crimson through the stars.

We'll cram our holds with plunder
From every world and moon,
And thunder back on the homeward track
To feast at old Turkoon!

THAT song that was roaring now from hundreds of lusty throats bad been the traditional song of the space pirates for centuries. Every corner of the Solar System had shivered at the sound of it, at one time or another. It echoed now in a fierce, swinging chant tbrough the nigbt at Turkoon Town.

The pirates and their women were feasting at rude tables and benches around a huge fire of dry fern-logs that blazed in the center of the street. The tables groaned with enormous masses of food, huge haunches of Jovian marsh-steers, rosy canal-fruit from Mars, sticky confections looted from Neptunian ships. And there were platoons of bottles and bulging casks from every world in the system. Strong drink was going down with tbe food as the Companions celebrated their partially successful foray.

Above the firelit feasters stretched the night sky of the Zone, the most wonderful in the system, a black canopy gaudy with thousands of blazing stars, with the yellow topaz of Saturn and the far green emeralds of Uranus and Neptune blazing high. Comets moved like mysterious white ghosts through the jungled heavens, and constantly meteors flashed and ran across the black sky-span.

At one of the tables sat Lana Cain, her smooth hair gleaming like dull gold in the firelight, her hand absently patting the neck of the great gray beast crouched beneath her—Ool, the space-dog.

John Thorn sat beside her, his dark face inscrutable and his black eyes watchful. Sual Av was feasting heartily farther down the table, joking and laughing with the other pirate captains, while Gunner Welk ate in brooding silence.

"They are like children, the Companions," the girl said to Thorn over the din of voices and clatter of bottles. "Already they have forgotten that they nearly met death in that trap today, in their rejoicing over the loot we got."

Thorn shrugged. "I can't say that I blame them. An outlaw has to take his fun when he can—he never knows whether he'll see the next day or not."

Lana's blue eyes, dark in the ruddy firelight, studied Thorn's lean face thoughtfully.

"But you Planeteers are not like most outlaws, John Thorn," she said. "There is something different about you—something purposeful, I don't know what."

Thorn sensed faint danger, but he smiled as he fingered a goblet of wonderful pink Martian glass.

"The only real purpose we Planeteers have is to hunt excitement, I guess," he told her. "We've done a lot of damn fool things, without much reason."

"Thorn, why do you not stay here with me, with the Companions?" Lana asked, impulsively grasping his hand. Her blue eyes eager on his, she added earnestly, "I have great plans, and with you Planeteers helping—"

She was interrupted by a sudden uproar in a fierce voice along the table. Thorn jumped up.

Old Stilicho Keene was standing, his rheumy eyes glaring with rage, his thin, bony hands trembling with passion as he faced the obese green Uranian, Jenk Cheerly.

"Say that again," shrilled the old pirate to the Uranian, "and I'll blow your lying head off your pig's body!"

Jenk Cheerly's small eyes glittered with hate as he rose to face the enraged old Martian.

"I *do* say it again!" squeaked the obese Uranian. "I say it was your fault that we nearly got trapped by those League cruisers today! You said you spied out the freighters and tankers before they blasted from Jupiter. If you did, you would have been sure to see those tankers were disguised battle-cruisers. So you didn't do it. Or you knew about the trap, and led us right into it!"

OLD Stilicho seemed to suffocate with his own passion. His bony figure was quivering, his wrinkled face livid.

"You're accusing me of treachery!" he shrilled. "Me, Stilicho Keene, that's rocketed with the Companions for fifty years! By space, Uranian, no man can—"

The old pirate's clawlike hand was darting toward the atom-pistol at his belt. Jenk Cheerly's fat hand flew toward his own weapon.

But Lana Cain sprang in between them. Her eyes were flaming with wrath.

"If you draw, I'll blast you both down!" she flared. "You know our rule—no quarreling among ourselves!"

"But, lass, you heard what he accused me of!" shrilled the old pirate, outraged. "I tell you, when I saw those tankers as they sailed from Jupiter, they were tankers, nothing else."

"Isn't it likely that real tankers did sail with the freighters," John Thorn said quietly, "to deceive any spies who might be watching them take off, and that the tankers were replaced by the disguised battle-cruisers at some secret rendezvous in space?"

Kinnel King, the handsome middle-aged Earthman captain, nodded quickly. "That must be the explanation."

"That may be so," grumbled Jenk Cheerly in his squeaky voice, "but I still say there was something queer about it. We should have got all the cargoes of those freighters, instead of just part of them."

Stilicho Keene stiffened again, but Lana hastily intervened to calm the old pirate.

"You've forgotten to initiate the Planeteers into the Companions, Stilicho," she reminded. "The Eight Goblets!"

The old man's face slowly cleared, and he turned around to Thorn and Sual Av and Gunner Welk.

"That's right," he cackled. "You boys ain't real pirates till you've drunk the Eight Goblets. Eh, Companions?"

A roaring shout of laughter rose from the fierce-faced corsairs and their women gathered at the firelit tables.

"Yes, the Goblets! The Eight Goblets for the Planeteers!"

"What the devil is this?" growled Gunner Welk suspiciously. "If they try any of their tricks on me—"

Under cover of the roar of laughing voices, Thorn spoke in a rapid, low voice to his two comrades, as they three stood close together behind the tables. They were momentarily unwatched, for all the mirthfully shouting pirates were watching old Stilicho as he supervised the preparations for the coming ceremony.

"I'm going to try my plan of searching Lana's papers tonight!" Thorn told his comrades swiftly. "If she ever wrote down what her father told her about Erebus, she'd surely still have it."

"John, it'll be deadly dangerous!" warned Gunner Welk in a taut undertone. "Remember, someone h e r e knows what we're after."

"Yes, whoever put that Ear in your pocket must be watching us all the time," muttered Sual Av.

"I'll never have a better chance than tonight, with everyone present at the feast," Thorn whispered. "You two stick here—it would awake suspicion if all three of us left."

HE stopped whispering abruptly as the roar of laughing voices began to lessen. Old Stilicho had held up a hand to quiet the pirate throng.

"Planeteers," he shrilled to the three comrades, "you've got a great name in the system, and you showed today you deserve it, for you saved our Lana from that trap when no one else could have done it. We're proud and glad to welcome you three among us. Eh, Companions?"

"Yes!" roared back the pirate feasters with one voice. Lana was sitting again, smiling at Thorn's puzzled face.

"But before you can *really* be of the Companions," the old pirate continued in his shrill, cracked voice, "you've got to drink the Eight Goblets, in proper order—to show that as a true Companion you defy the governments and navies of all the eight inhabited worlds!"

Three grinning pirates advanced, each carrying a tray on which rested eight small glass goblets filled with various colored liquors.

Sual Av's green eyes widened. "Are we expected to—"

Stilicho Keene cackled. "Yes, lads. You're expected to drink defiance to the eight worlds as we call them off."

Thorn and his two comrades took the little goblets first handed them. They were brimming with colorless rock-liquor, the fiery distillate that is the favorite drink of Mercury.

Stilicho, grinning, raised his bony hand. And from the firelit feasters crashed a mirthful shout.

"Mercury!"

The Planeteers tossed off the burning liquor. It seared Thorn's throat, but Gunner Welk smacked his lips.

"Venus!" crashed the shout an instant later.

Down went the little goblets of heady black Venusian swamp-grape wine. And the pirate horde, without giving the Planeteers time to catch breath, called out planet after planet.

A goblet of tingling brown Earth whisky; another of suave, smooth desert-flower cordial from Mars; and a bumper of raw, potent marsh-apple brandy from Jupiter followed each other.

Thorn gasped for air, but neither he nor his comrades hesitated. A goblet of musty-tasting wine from the fungus-fruits of Saturn; another of sour, strong Uranian beer; and finally a last goblet of sweet, cloying Neptunian sacra liqueur.

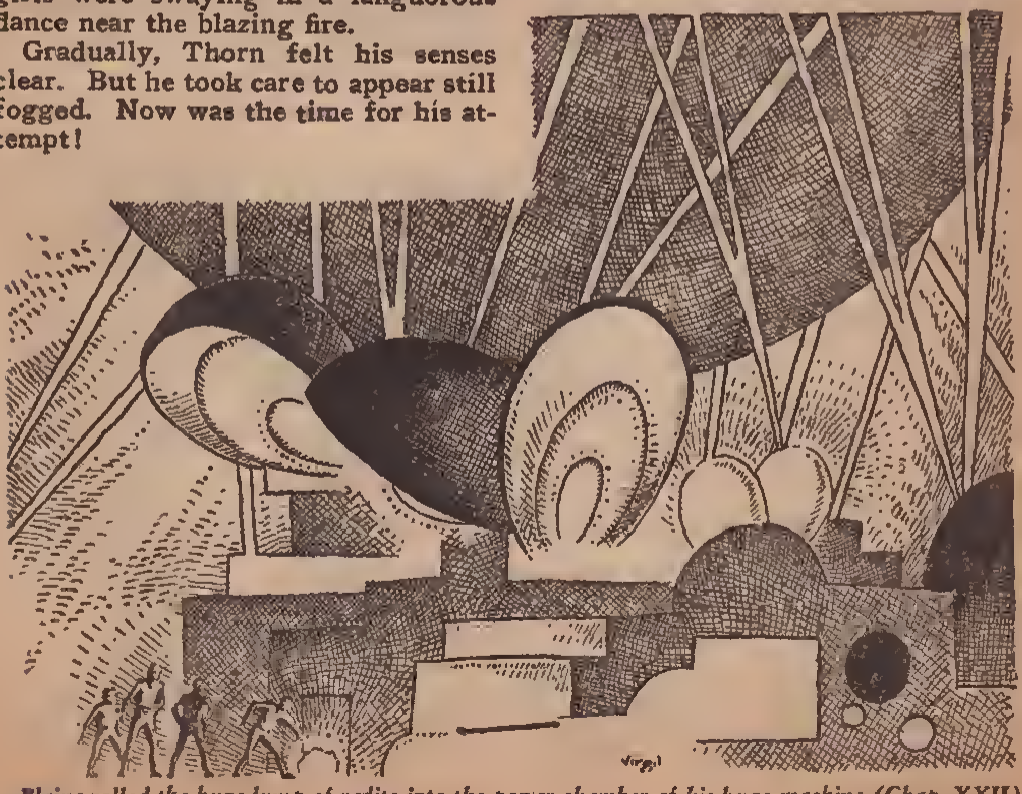
Thorn's head was spinning as he smashed the last of the eight goblets on the ground. Sual Av was staggering, and even Gunner Welk looked unsteady. Old Stilicho slapped Thorn's back.

"You're true Companions of Space now, Planeteers," cackled the old pirate, and approving roars went up from the crowd.

Every pirate there knew it was the Planeteers who had saved their idolized girl leader in the fight that day. The heartiness of their lusty welcome was unmistakable.

Thorn fought to keep the liquor from overcoming him, as he went back to his seat beside Lana. His senses were hazed—he was only dimly aware that now wild music was thrumming from stringed instruments somewhere, and that two white-limbed Venusian girls were swaying in a languorous dance near the blazing fire.

Gradually, Thorn felt his senses clear. But he took care to appear still fogged. Now was the time for his attempt!



Blaine rolled the huge lump of radite into the power-chamber of his huge machine (Chap. XXII)

"I need some air after the Eight Goblets," he told Lana, keeping his voice thick. "I'm going for a walk."

To his discomfiture, Lana rose from her place and took his arm. "I'll walk with you, John Thorn," she smiled.

THORN could not reject her, though inwardly he chafed. They moved away from the firelit feast, the space-dog Ool padding silently beside the girl. None of the crowd seemed to notice them leaving, for now a lithe red Martian girl was twisting in a furious desert dance, to the roaring applause of the Companions.

The roar of shouts and laughter and crashing glass behind them faded away as they walked a little down the dark, silent and dusty street of Turkoon Town. The blazing sky above them seemed alive with the long, shining trails of flashing meteors.

Thorn looked down at the girl's gold head. Her starlit white face seemed softer now, with a queer yearning in it as she gazed along the dark street. It all seemed strangely dreamlike to the Earthman—he and the pirate girl and the green-eyed, padding space-dog walking together under the meteor-blazoned night sky.

Lana Cain looked up at him and asked the question that she had already voiced earlier that evening.

"Why don't you Planeteers stay here with us, John Thorn? With you to help, my plans could—"

"Your plans?" he repeated, interrupting. "What do you mean, Lana?"

She stopped and looked up at him. "Do you think that being leader of the pirates is all I want? No, that is only a means to an end. I have a dream, the same dream my father had—a dream of making the Zone a place of orderly life and happy cities, instead of just a wild, lswless jungle."

Her words came with an eager rush. "There are hundreds of asteroids in the Zone that are habitable or could be made habitable. A whole new world, that could be independent and self-sufficient, and could be a refuge for oppressed people from all parts of the system, people fleeing from tyranny and injustice."

Lana's voice throbbed with earnestness. "My father worked with that dream in mind, organized the scattered bands of pirates and made them temper their bloodthirsty ways. I've worked toward that goal, too. And now, when the League of Cold Worlds ia about to attack the Inner Alliance, the chance is coming to make that dream come true. For with interplanetary war going on, we could organize our new world in the Zone without interference! And millions of people may want a safe refuge."

Thorn was impressed by the girl's sincerity and breadth of ambition.

"But, Lana, are all the eight worlds as bad as you seem to think?" he said slowly. "It's true the four worlds of the League are crushed under the fanatical tyranny of Haskell Trask, their dictator, but what about Earth and the other three inner worlds? They have no tyranny or oppression."

"They have black injustice that is as bad as tyranny," answered Lana, her starlit face hardening. "Look at what they did to my father!"

Thorn saw that he could not change her bitter obsession on that subject. He shook his head.

"Perhaps you're right," he said. And he added thoughtfully, "I was wondering why a girl like you was content to live as leader of these wild pirates. But I understand, now that you've told me of your scheme."

"And you'll help me make that dream come true, John Thorn? You Planeteers will stay?" Lana asked eagerly. She added earnestly, "You're the first one I've ever told of my plan."

Thorn was touched. "I'll have to talk to Sual Av and Gunner Welk before I can promise to stay," he evaded.

He put his hand to his head, and winced. "I'm not feeling so good yet, after those Eight Goblets. I think I'll pass up the rest of the feast, and sleep it off."

"You're not ill?" Lana asked anxiously. "If you are—"

SHE was gazing up at him, her dark eyes wide with worry in her starlit face, her hand on his shoulder.

Thorn felt a sudden strong impulse

to kiss her. He mastered himself, but he suspected that his feelings had shown in his face, for Lana's expression changed.

"I—I must go back to the feast," she said, with an unaccustomed shyness. "If I am not there, they will be quarreling. I will see you in the morning."

He watched her move back down the dark street toward the firelit feast, the space-dog silently accompanying her. Then Thorn turned and walked with assumed unsteadiness to his cabin. But instead of entering the cabin, he slipped around it, and then hastened along the back of the street toward the Council House.

The long, low metal building was dark and silent. Thorn listened outside a back door, then pushed stealthily inside. The dull red ray of his pocket fluoric flash-lamp lighted him through store-rooms and a kitchen. The place was deserted.

HE found Lana's bedroom quickly. It was a bare chamber with a chromaloy cot and chest, and a rack of atom-pistols on the wall. There was a closet, to which Thorn went first. In it hung a dozen suits of the mannish silk jackets and trousers the pirate girl always wore. But in the back of the closet, Thorn found a single gayly-flowered flowing tunic-dress of the type worn by Earth women to social functions.

A queer wave of tenderness swept him as he touched the gay, flowered dress. It was obviously unworn. He could picture Lana taking it secretly from pirate loot, trying it on—

"Hell, am I going soft on the girl?" John Thorn muttered to himself. "I'm wasting time!"

He searched through the big chest. In it he found a flat viridium box that was packed with papers.

Thorn's pulses raced as he hastily started scanning the papers by his little ray of dull red light. The first he unfolded was a parchment document, discolored with age. It was a captain's commission in the Earth Navy, dated over forty years before, made out to Martin Cain. Across it was stamped "CANCELLED."

Most of the other papers were old letters of Lana's father. They told nothing. Then Thorn muttered an exclamation as he took out of the box a thick log-book, bound in marsh-calf skin, and filled with the square, precise writing of Martin Cain.

Swiftly Thorn riffled the pages until he found the year he was looking for. With taut eagerness he read the entries.

9-27. (Off Pluto.) It looks as though our raid on the Pluto mining bases with a single ship was too daring. We are being hotly pursued by Neptunian cruisers, and can hear the audio-calls of others.

9-28. Fear net is closing in on us. Space alive with audio calls.

9-29. I, Martin Cain, am sole survivor of my ship's company. We were trapped and attacked at 7:22, sun-time, by eight Neptunian cruisers. We got two, but the rest gunned us till our power-chambers exploded and tore our ship apart. I was flung clear, and found one of our lifeboats that also had been thrown clear. Got away in it unnoticed. But am far outside Pluto's orbit, where they had chased us. Dare not go back to Pluto, and have not half enough fuel to take me to Saturn, the next nearest world sunward.

9-30. I am taking a desperate chance—am heading OUTWARD, toward Erebus. I know no one has ever yet visited that world and returned, but my last chance is to get fuel-ores there, for it is far nearer than Saturn. I greatly fear that I shall never get back to the Zone to see my little girl and my wife again.

Thorn turned to the next entry, his pulse pounding with excitement. But the next entry was dated weeks later.

12-7. Back to the Zone again, thank God, thank God! I shall never go beyond Pluto's orbit again.

Thorn desperately ran through the following pages. But there was no mention whatever in them of Erebus.

Why had not Martin Cain made one entry about his visit to Erebus? What was there on that far, dark, mysterious planet that Cain had so carefully kept secret?

"Raise your hands, John Thorn!"

Thorn turned, appalled. Lights had flashed on in the little room. Standing in the doorway were two men.

They were Jenk Cheerly, the fat Uranian, and the Earthman, Kinnel

King. They were covering him with atom-pistols, and their faces were deadly.

CHAPTER IX

Imprisoned Planeteers

THORN rose slowly to his feet, keeping his hands raised. A wrong movement, he knew, would mean instant death. Inwardly he was bitterly reproaching himself for letting himself be surprised.

"So, Planeteer," said Kinnel King in a deadly low tone, "you and your comrades seem to be traitors. Less than an hour after you've been initiated into the Companions, we find you here rifling Lana's secrets."

"Didn't I t e l l you, Kinnel?" squeaked Jenk Cheerly, the fat Uranian's little eyes glittering with beady triumph. "Didn't I tell you this Thorn was up to something when he slipped away from the feast, and that we ought to follow him?"

"T a k e his atom-pistol, Jenk," ordered Kinnel King without removing his eyes from Thorn. "Then go and get Lana and the others—and make sure you get the other two Planeteers!"

Jenk Cheerly lifted the weapon from Thorn's pelt, and then the obese Uranian waddled hastily out of the room. Thorn stood, his hands still raised, facing the other Earthman.

Kinnel King's middle-aged, handsome face was dark with loathing, and there was a deadly expression in his brooding eyes as he watched the Planeteer.

"King, listen to me!" John Thorn said desperately. "You're an Earthman, and I—"

"Be silent!" Kinnel King hissed, his eyes narrowing to pinpoints. "I'll blast you where you stand, traitor."

In heavy silence, Thorn waited. He knew there was not the slightest chance for him to make a break under the muzzle of the other's weapon. To do so would be merely to commit suicide without gaining anything.

Presently there was a rapid tramp of many feet, an excited babel of voices entering the Council House. Into the lighted rooms came Lana Cain, and with her were old Stilicho, Brun Abo, the Jovian captain, and the waddling, gloating green-faced Uranian, Jenk Cheerly.

With them came four pirates who held atom-pistols against the backs of Gunner Welk and Sual Av. Gunner's clothing was torn, his temple bleeding from a wound, his cold blue eyes like icy flames. Sual Av's ugly face was taut and watchful.

"They'd never have got us, John," rumbled the big Mercurian as they entered, "if they hadn't jumped us from behind."

"It's all my fault," Thorn said bitterly.

Lana Cain was looking at Thorn. The girl's face was white and stunned, her blue eyes wide and unbelieving. Then as her gaze swung from Thorn's face to the rifled papers on the floor, her expression changed to one of flaming wrath.

"It's true, then," she whispered throbbingly to Thorn. "You *are* a traitor to the Companions, a paltry thief trying to steal my secrets. And I know what you were after!" she flared. "The secret of Erebus! Because I wouldn't tell it to you, you slipped in here, trying to steal it."

"Lana, listen—" Thorn began with desperate earnestness.

LANA cut him off with a stinging slap across the face. The space-dog Ool jumped forward, great eyes blazing.

"All the time you were listening to my plans, pretending sympathy, you were only thinking of how you could get that secret from me!" flamed Lana. "I wouldn't tell it to you, because I didn't want you or anybody else to go to that terrible world. I almost wish now that I'd *told* you, that I'd let you go blundering out to Erebus to meet the horrible fate you'd meet there!"

"What are we waiting for? Why don't we blast these dogs down now?" demanded Brun Abo, the scarred-faced Jovian.

A fierce growl of approval of the suggestion went up from the other pirate captains. Even old Stilicho Keene was looking at Thorn and his two comrades with accusation in his face.

"Boy, I never thought you Planeteers would do a thing like this," said the old pirate dismally.

Thorn was thinking with desperate rapidity. Should he tell Lana the truth, that they Planeteers were agents of Earth who only sought the Erebus secret to get the radite that would save the Alliance?

He saw that it would gain nothing to tell. It would make no difference to the girl, who was so bitter against Earth she would do nothing to help that world. And it would give away the great secret that the Alliance had a weapon with which it might be able to resist the League attack.

"Lana, listen to me," Thorn said rapidly. "I'm not denying that we Planeteers came here seeking the secret of Erebus. We have a vital reason for wanting it, and when you wouldn't tell it, I had to try to steal it. I admit all that.

"But I want to warn you that there's someone else here—someone right here in this room now, if I'm right, who means to get that secret and use it to take millions of lives. You can save all those lives by giving us the secret and letting us go!"

"You pile one lie on another!" blazed Lana. "You try to cover your own guilt by accusing innocent men!"

"Let's take them out and blast them down now!" cried Brun Abo.

"It's the penalty for treachery among the Companions," old Stilicho said miserably. "I guess we got to do it."

Lana Cain paled a little. She shook her head.

"No, we'll not kill them now," she said. "Put them in the brig until morning."

"And why shouldn't we kill them now?" demanded Brun Abo of her. "Is it possible you've a tenderness for this Thorn?"

The girl turned on the Jovian, as though stung.

"I've only hate for such treacherous liars!" she flared. "But we're going to execute them, not murder them. In the morning is soon enough."

Surprisingly, Jenk Cheerly supported her.

"Lana's right," the Uranian squeaked and the girl glanced gratefully at him.

Thorn tried to speak again, but Brun Abo snarled an order, and the four pirates covering the Planeteers forced the three comrades to march out of the Council House into the night.

The brig, as the pirates called their prison, was a small, square, metal structure behind the main street of Turkoon Town. It had but one room, into whose dark interior they were rudely thrust. The heavy metal door slammed, and the wave-lock clicked.

"Make the best of your time till morning, Planeteers," rasped Brun Abo as he and his men left.

"John, they didn't leave any guards outside," said Sual Av quickly in the darkness. "Maybe we can get out."

THEY rapidly inspected their prison. But Thorn found that there was no chance whatever of escape from it.

The building was wholly constructed of inertrum, most intractable of metals. The two tiny, barred windows were mere loopholes, and the wave-lock of the door could only be operated by the secret frequencies of its wave-key applied from the outside.

"There's no getting out of *here*," grunted Gunner Welk. "Damn that fat Jenk Cheerly! It was he who suspected you were up to something, John, and followed you with Kinnel King."

"Either Cheerly or Brun Abo must be the League spy here!" Sual Av declared tensely. "And it looks to me as though Cheerly is the man. He only joined the pirates recently, and it was he who tipped them off about the Jovian freighters, the League trap that nearly succeeded in capturing Lana."

"What the devil are we going to

do?" demanded the big Mercurian. "We can't break out of this place and we're due to be blasted at dawn."

"There's only one chance left us," Thorn rapped. "When they take us out in the morning, we'll make a break and try to seize Lana. I don't think the pirates would take a chance of hurting her by firing at us then. We might get away with her."

Gunner Welk's rumbling voice came slowly, "But the girl might get hurt in the fight, John. I thought you were sort of in love with her."

"Yes," added Sual Av, "and it looked to me as though she was beginning to feel the same way about you."

"Are you two space-struck to say such things?" Thorn demanded fiercely. "Me, in love with that wild pirate girl?"

Then his voice wavered a little. "Even if I did love her, I'd have to forget it. For we *have* to get that secret out of her somehow, if the Alliance is to have a chance. That is bigger and more important than everybody in the entire zone."

"All right, we'll try it," rumbled Gunner Welk. "It looks like our last bet."

PRESENTLY he and Sual Av were sleeping on the floor calmly oblivious to whatever fate the dawn might bring.

But John Thorn could not sleep. Restlessly he paced the darkness of the little metal room. In his mind queerly persisted the image of Lana's white, stunned face and accusing eyes. He tried to drive that reproachful face from his thoughts and couldn't.

White mists from the jungles had seeped into Turkoon Town as the night advanced, a cold fog that nipped the bones.

A little wind moaned through the dark, sleeping pirate stronghold, and at intervals came raucous calls of weird life teeming in the fern-forest.

Thorn heard a ship blasting off from the distant field, the thudding thunder of its tubes rapidly dying away. He wondered broodingly if ever he and his two comrades would see space again.

Or was the coming dawn to end forever the career of the Planeteers?

Hours dragged past, and finally a faint dawn light began to illumine the swirling gray mists outside. Suddenly through the fog came a wild, distant cry. It was echoed in a minute by raw shouts in other voices.

Thorn leaped to the little window, but could see nothing through the mists. He heard his comrades scrambling up.

"What's happened?" exclaimed Sual Av, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"I don't know!" Thorn cried. "But something's wrong."

He could hear a babel of raging shouts and calls crackling like flame through Turkoon Town, waking everyone. And men were running through the clearing mists toward the field of ships.

"Stilicho!" yelled Thorn through the window as he glimpsed the old Martian pirate running painfully along the street.

The old man hesitated, then hobbled quickly over to the window of the little prison. He was buckling on his atom-pistols with trembling hands, and his wrinkled face was wild.

"What's happened?" Thorn demanded tensely.

"Lana — she's been kidnaped!" hissed the old Martian. "Jenk Cheerly did it some time last night."

"Lana kidnaped?" Thorn yelled wildly, his brown face suddenly haggard. "How do you know Cheerly did it?"

"This morning one of our men found our guards at the ship-field lying murdered!" babbled the raging old man. "And one of Cheerly's Uranian crew, too—fatally wounded and left for dead. The Uranian boasted about what Cheerly had done, before he died.

"He said that Cheerly was not any pirate at all, like he pretended, but a League spy—the head of Haskell Trask's secret service! He said Cheerly had planned the trap that nearly captured Lana in the attack on them freighters, and that when that failed, Cheerly had used another plan to kidnap Lana last night. He used

you in his plan, John Thorn!"

"Cheerly used me to kidnap Lana?" Thorn gasped. "My God, man, what are you talking about?"

"Lana's soft on you," spat old Stilicho. "She didn't want to see you blasted this morning, and Cheerly knew it. So, according to that dying Uranian, Cheerly told Lana that he'd help you Planeteers escape if she released you. He got Lana to start secretly with him to this brig to let you out, and once he had her alone like that, he and his men grabbed her. They blasted down the field-guards and took her in his ship. He's taking her to Saturn!"

THE raging old pirate turned from the window. "We're going to follow Cheerly's ship. And God help that Uranian when we catch up with him!"

"Stilicho, wait—" Thorn cried wildly, but the old pirate was already hobbling urgently away in the mists.

A few moments later came the thunderous roar of many ships taking off in the distance. As it died away, Thorn turned to his comrades, his face stricken.

"She was going to help us escape," he said in a slow, choked voice. "Even after I'd tried to steal her secret, she was going to help us get away. And because of that, she's in the hands of Haskell Trask's spymaster now!"

His eyes were wild. "Think of what Trask and that fat fiend Cheerly will do to her to wring the secret out of her! And all because of me. She'd never have been kidnaped if she hadn't tried to help me!"

"It's not your fault, John," rumbled Gunner Welk, his hard face showing his emotion. "Cheerly would have found one way or another to get hold of her, even if we'd never come here."

"And Stilicho and Kinnel King and all the rest of those pirates are trailing him now," Sual Av added quickly. "They'll catch him and bring the girl back all right."

"I hope to heaven they do," muttered the big Mercurian. "For if they fail, and Cheerly gets that girl to Saturn, it means that the League, and not the Alliance, will get that radite from Erebus."

Thorn started violently. For the moment, in his first wild concern for Lana's safety, he had forgotten the larger issue.

"The last hope of the Alliance is gone if that happens!" he exclaimed. His fists clenched convulsively. "And we're locked up here! Isn't there something we can *do?*"

"Nothing but wait," answered Gunner heavily. *(Turn Page)*

The long hours of that day were a torture infinitely prolonged to John Thorn. Pacing the little room, peering tensely from the window, he waited in terrible suspense.

They were not brought any food or water. They had been completely forgotten for the time being in the greater catastrophe. They could see the street of Turkoon Town thronged with excited pirate women and men who had been left behind by the hasty expedition that had thundered forth in chase of Jenk Cheerly.

Night came, and more hours dragged past. Then from the distance came the thudding thunder of many ships landing.

"They're back!" Thorn cried tautly. "But did they rescue Lana?"

"We'll soon know," muttered Sual Av.

They heard the pirate crews and captains trooping back into town, heard a loud uproar of voices. They waited tensely.

Then a thin, snow-haired figure approached their window in the starlight. It was old Stilicho Keene, moving slowly.

"Did you bring Lana back?" Thorn cried.

The old man's cracked voice was unsteady and choking with emotion as he answered.

"No, we didn't." His accents became shrill and wild. "We were only a few hours behind Cheerly's ship—we could see it in our 'scopes and were sure to overtake him. And then he was joined by a force of fifty League cruisers, as an escort.

"He must have had secret arrangements with them cruisers to be waiting for him, damn him!" Stilicho continued. "We only had twenty ships. I wanted to keep after them anyway, and fight it out, but Brun Abo and the rest said it would be suicide!"

STILICHO'S old voice broke. "I guess they were right, maybe. Getting ourselves all killed wouldn't have saved Lana. Nothing can save her now—and I don't want to live any more, with the lass gone."

Tremulous tears were glistening on the old Martian's starlit face. He wiped them with a quivering hand.

Thorn felt a cold, ghastly shock from what he had heard. Blind emotion surged in him. And then the instinct to fight back, to persevere, rose to dominate him.

"Are you going to give up Lana for dead?" he demanded fiercely of the old man outside. "Are you just going weep like a woman for her, or are you going to *do* something?"

"What can I do?" Stilicho quavered. "I'd give my life for the lass, but there's nobody can save her now. She's in Haskell Trask's dungeons on Saturn, by now, and a thousand men couldn't get her out of there."

"A thousand men might not, but three men could!" Thorn flashed fiercely. "We three—we Planeteers!"

Stilicho stared hopelessly. "How could even you Planeteers hope to snatch her from the claws of Haskell Trask?"

"We've done things as seemingly impossible as that in the past, haven't we?" Thorn demanded. "Give us the chance, Stilicho, and we'll get her out of there or die trying!"

The old Martian's eyes widened. "If anybody could do it, you Planeteers could," he muttered. He stared doubtfully at Thorn's starlit face. "But you Planeteers are only after the secret Lana knows, the same as Cheerly."

"We want that secret, yes," Thorn said tensely. "But the only way we can hope to get it is by rescuing Lana! Can't you see that? I'm hoping that if we save her, she'll tell us the secret. But whether she does or not, she'll have been saved, and that's all that you care for!"

And as Stilicho still hesitated, Thorn hissed a grim reminder.

"Think what Cheerly will do to Lana to wring the secret from her! Haskell Trask isn't above torture!"

The old man's figure quivered at that.

"She'll never tell them," he muttered, "even though they kill her. I know Lana."

Then the old pirate stiffened with decision, and he spoke rapidly to the tensely waiting three.

"I'm going to take the chance you Planeteers can save her. It looks like the only chance the lass has got. I'm going to release you, and we'll head out in my ship for Saturn, before Brun Abo and the rest find out what I've done."

"Will the crew of your ship follow you?" Thorn asked quickly, his pulses pounding with excitement and hope.

"Hell, they'd sail straight into the sun if *I* laid the course!" exclaimed the old pirate. His cracked voice throbbed with eagerness as he continued. "I'll have to steal the wave-key of this hrig from the Council House to let you out. And I'll pass a whisper to my crew to gather in the *Venture* at once."

THE old Martian hastened away through the starlight. John Thorn swung round to his comrades.

"It's a fighting chance we've got now, at least!" he exclaimed.

"A pretty slim one," said Gunner Welk somberly. "How in hell's name are we to get that girl away from Saturn in the téeth of all the League forces? An army couldn't do it."

"We'll have to do what an army couldn't, then," Thorn said grimly. "There must be *some* way."

Presently they glimpsed Stilicho Keene hastening hack to their prison. At the old Martian's heels followed a great, gray shape with blazing green eyes—Lana's space-dog, Ool.

Stilicho turned the wave-key's beam on the lock. The frequencies actuated the delicate mechanism, and the door opened.

"I had a time stealing the wave-key!" panted the old man as Thorn and his comrades emerged. "Brun Abo and the rest are up in the Council House. As soon as they remember you three, they'll be here to have you executed."

"Why did you bring the space-dog?" Gunner asked.

"I didn't bring him—he followed me," Stilicho said. "He's been wild since Lana was kidnaped, and I think he senses we're going after her. The critters are a little telepathic, you know."

"Let him come along—we don't want to arouse any commotion," Thorn said swiftly. "Is your crew waiting at the ship?"

"All ready, by now," the old pirate replied. "Follow me. We'll have to slip out to the field without heing seen."

He led the Planeteers through the starlight, close against the towering, dark wall of fern-jungle that encircled Turkoon Town. By that circuitous route they reached the field where the massed pirate ships lay glinting under the meteor-hlazoned sky. The hig space-dog padded heside them as they approached the *Venture*.

They climhed hastily into the long black ship, the animal following them. Stilicho's motley crew were waitlng. The doors were already grinding shut as the Planeteers followed the old pirate up to the control-room.

A few moments later, with a thunderous hlast of fire, the *Venture* shot skyward on its desperate mission.

CHAPTER X

Under Saturn's Rings

A HARP-STRING tenseness gripped the four men in the *Venture's* control-room as they peered ahead into space.

"So far, so good," muttered old Stilicho Keene, leaning forward over the hank of firing-keys to gaze with faded eyes. "We're past the outer League patrols. Now if we can only slip through the inner."

"We're in their zone now," John Thorn warned tautly. "See anything in the 'scope, Gunner?"

"Not yet," the hig Mercurian rumhled without taking his eyes from the eyepiece.

The *Venture* moved ateadily on through the void, its rockets cut down to a low, soft purr. The aura-chart was dead. They were running blind so their own aura would not cut the aura of any vigilant patrol cruiser and give them away unnecessarily.

Saturn bulked colossal in the star-

gemmed vault ahead, an enormous, yellowish aphere encircled hy its immense, sweeping white rings. Even from this distance of a few million miles, the mighty rings looked quite solid. The thin black gap between the two outermost rings, Cassini's division, stood out sharp and clear. It was hard to realize that those great, solid-seeming white hands were really vast swarms of tiny satellites circling the planet.

Out beyond even the huge rings marched the planet's nine brilliant moons. Titan was a bright little disk far on the other side of the spinning monater world. Tethys and Rhea shone to the left. And Iapetus, a hright white moon almost as large as Mercury, lay close ahead on the right.

"The Saturnian Navy has a hig outer base on Iapetus," warned Thorn. "It'll he alive with cruisers now that the navies of all four League planets are concentrated here."

"I know, hut we *got* to run close to Iapetus if we're going to slip around to the night side of Saturn," quavered the old Martian pirate.

"Keep at least two million miles out, to clear the auras of the base," Thorn told him.

The *Venture* purred on, and the hig white moon began to march slowly past on their right. The Planeteers and the old pirate were silent and strained.

Sual Av scratched his head irritahly. "Curse me if I can get used to this wig," he muttered.

The Venusian's appearance was curiously changed. His bald pate had heen covered hy a wig of short, coarse black hair, and his face and skin bad been stained pale green. John Thorn and Gunner Welk were similarly transformed. Their faces too were now a livid green, and the Mercurian's bristling yellow hair was dyed hlack.

The people of Saturn, and also of Uranus and Neptune, bad acquired their peculiar green complexion during the past thousand years. Their worlds, like all tbe others in the system, had first heen colonized hy pioneering Earthmen in the 21st century, though a few centuries later all those seven colonized worlds had seceded from Earth and become independent planets. In the generations since the first colonization, environment had gradually changed the original Earth stock.

The men of Jupiter had grown into a squat, great-boned race, because of the dragging gravitation of their world. The men of Mars had acquired their red skin because of the predominance of certain metallic elements in their air and food. And aimilarly, the men of Saturn and Uranus and Neptune, because of a *lack* of certain elements on their worlds, had acquired their characteristic jaundiced green complexion.

THORN and his two comrades had realized that disguise was vitally necessary for their daring venture on Saturn. So, during the days that the *Venture* had hurtled at top speed toward the far ringed world, the Planeteers had worked to make themselves look as much as possible like Saturnians.

Now the *Venture* was well past Iapetus, and swinging around to the night side of Saturn in a great parabola.

"Shall we pass under the rings?" asked the old Martian pirate, turning from the firing-keys.

Thorn nodded. "It'll keep us in shadow hy going under them. Better cling close beneath them."

Satnrn filled all space hefore tbem now, looming colossal in the firmament with the tilted plane of its outer gigantic ring shadowing ahove them as their ship shot beneath it. The ring, more than tbirty thousand miles in width, was hrightly sunlit on its upper side because of the tilt of its plane, hut here beneath it they were in shadow.

Space above tbem was now roofed as far as the eye could atretch hy tbe white, gleaming, concentric rings. At this close distance they could clearly see the millions of separate satellites that made up the rings, vast circular swarms of tiny planetoids endlessly whirling. Then they were in past the rings, and only six thousand miles from the nighted surface of Saturn.

Stilicho Keene pointed a bony finger toward a misty glow of lights that lay slightly north of the equator.

"Them's the lights of Saturnopolia," the old pirate declared.

"Run westward," John Thorn ordered. "The fungus forests are in that direction, and if we three are to pose as *slith*-hunters, that's where we need to land."

The first Planeteer watched with emotion as the distant lights of Saturnopolis slid away to the left. Down there in the great capital city of Saturn, somewhere, was Lana Cain. She would likely be prisoned in the citadel of Haskell Trask, dictator of the League—the big fortress-palace that was the very storm center of the gathering menace threatening the four inner worlds.

Thorn had had the girl in his mind every hour of the long flight out to Saturn. Again and again he had visioned her eager white face as she had stood with him under the meteor-blazing night sky of Turkoon, telling him her dreams for the future. She had become much more to him, he realized deeply, than just the pirate girl who held the secret he must obtain.

The lights of Saturnopolis disappeared as the *Venture* throbbed westward through the night. They glimpsed the lights of another, smaller city far to the north. Then Stilicho sent the ship in a long, descending glide toward the far-stretching black wilderness that now lay beneath.

Air whistled thinly outside the walls. The ship dropped into thin mists. Then through the mists the surface rushed up toward them—a vast and endless forest of grotesque, towering growths, dimly lit by the radiance of three moons and the majestic arc of the ring.

With a prolonged flash from the keel tubes, and a soft, bumping jar, the *Venture* landed. They were in silent darkness.

"Here's the fungus forest you wanted to be landed in," said Stilicho doubtfully. "It's a long way from here to Saturnopolis, though."

"We'll get there," Thorn told him grimly. "It would be inviting capture to land too near the capital. By landing here and working our way toward Saturnopolis as *slith*-hunters, we'll be much less likely to be suspected by the secret police."

GUNNER WELK and Sual Av were gathering the atom-guns and other equipment they were to take with them. The Planeteers had already changed into jackets and boots of soft Jovian leather.

"You're sure you understand where you're to wait for us with the *Venture?*" Thorn asked the old pirate.

Stilicho's white head bobbed. "Out in the ring, in Cassini's division just at the west limb of the planet-shadow. We'll lie there in the ship till you come. But how will you get out there?"

"If we get Lana out safely," Thorn clipped, "we'll steal a small ship somehow and get there."

They went down to the ship door. It had been opened and the frigid, misty air of Saturn, faintly tainted with ammonia, was pouring into the ship. The motley crew was silently watching as the Planeteers prepared to disembark. And Ool, the big gray space-dog, pressed against Thorn's legs and looked up at him with great green eyes that held an almost human expression of anxiety.

"Ool wants to go with you," said Stilicho. "He senses you're going after Lana."

"We daren't take him—it'd arouse too much attention for poor *slith*-hunters to own such a rare beast. You hold him, Stilicho," Thorn said.

"Won't you change your mind and let me go along with you?" asked the old Martian pleadingly.

"We've argued that out," Thorn reminded him. "One of us four has got to keep the ship waiting at the rendezvous in the ring, and that's the way in which you can best help us."

Stilicho, holding the space-dog's neck, reached up to grip Thorn's hand with bony fingers. His cracked voice quavered.

"Good luck, boy—and God grant you bring the lass out safely."

The door ground shut. With a re-

sounding reverberation of blazing keel-tubes, the *Venture* blasted off.

The Planeteers stood silent in the frigid misty darkness, watching the ship disappear into the sky.

"So we're on our own now," rumbled Gunner Welk. "And all we have to do is make our way into Saturnopolis through ten thousand secret police who are watching for spies, break into Haskell Trask's citadel that even Saturnians don't dare go near, and steal away the dictator's most important prisoner right from under his nose. It's almost too easy!"

"I hate to see you grow sarcastic, Gunner," said Sual Av worriedly. "It's the mark of a small mind."

The Venusian dodged, chuckling, as the towering Mercurian aimed a hearlike blow at him.

"Be quiet!" snapped John Thorn tautly. "I hear someone or something."

The other two Planeteers were instantly silent, all three gripping their heavy atom-guns and listening intently.

The great fungus forest that covers much of Saturn stretched about them in the cold mist, illuminated by the combined ring-light and moonlight. All around the little clearing in which they stood towered the enormous fungi, huge gray growths in the form of bulbous spheres, drawing their sustenance by parasitism from the thick mat of spongy mosses underfoot.

NOTHING appeared stirring except a few "diggers"—furry little beasts with flat, spadelike noses, whose red eyes fearfully watched from tunnel-mouths nearby. The only sounds were the occasional zooming drone of pinkly luminous "fire bats" winging through the towering fungi, and the long, distant ululation of a pack of "climbers."

The sky over the Planeteers' heads was weirdly magnificent—dominated by the colossal arc of the rings that spanned the heavens just south of the zenith like a huge, shining, white rainbow. Out beyond the rings shone the bright shield of Titan, sinking rapidly toward the horizon while Tethys and Rhea rose like twin jewels among the stars.

"I don't hear anything," muttered Sual Av finally. "But the noise of the ship landing may have attracted—"

"John, look out!" yelled Gunner Welk suddenly. "A *slith!*"

One of the smaller bulbous gray fungi of the forest had suddenly begun to move. It came toward them with rocket-speed, a charge almost faster than the eye could follow.

Thorn knew it was *slith* as he flung his atom-gun to his shoulder. That creature alone could so perfectly mimic the gray fungi by means of its protective coloration.

Thorn glimpsed the charging thing over the sights of his weapon for an instant, a bulbous, oily gray monster ten feet high, its dumpy, shapeless body running with incredible swiftness on thick little legs, the two cold, bright eyes in the front of its faceless body flaming as its white-fanged mouth gaped unbelievably wide.

He fired and missed. His shell exploded blindingly just behind the charging *slith*. Gunner fired an instant later, and his atom-shell hit the creature's side. When the flare of the shell vanished, they saw the great gray mass lying unstirring only a dozen feet from them.

"We let that thing catch us napping!" Thorn said harshly. "We should have remembered this forest is alive with *sliths*."

"You're right about that!" yelled Sual Av. "There's another of them!"

The Venusian's gun fairly leaped to his shoulder. But instead of firing, he stared stupefiedly.

"Devils of space, look at it! The thing's coming a*part!*"

The second *slith* that Sual Av had glimpsed was a hundred yards away among the fungi. It was an even bigger creature than the first, and its great gray mass was grotesquely different in shape, consisting of a large mass with the cold, bright eyes and wide, lipless mouth, and a smaller attached mass with eyes and mouth also.

The smaller mass was detaching itself from the main body of the creature. Soft gray flesh stretched and

snapped. And instead of one *slith*, there stood two, a large one and a little one. A moment later, both of them charged toward the Planeteers.

The shells of three atom-guns exploded together around the onrushing monsters. Both lay dead when the flares died.

"Am I seeing things or did that creature really divide into two?" demanded the Venusian.

"Planetary zoology must be a closed book to you," Gunner Welk told him dourly. "If you knew any, you'd know that the aboriginal animal life of Saturn is asexual, and propagates by fission."

"Come on—we'll get the teeth out of these carcasses," Thorn said. "It's lucky we've killed a few, for *slith*-hunters going back to town without any teeth might arouse suspicion."

THEY advanced to the torn dead bodies, feeling with this first locomotion the powerful drag of Saturnian gravitation. Only the fact that that gravitation was partly neutralized by the centrifugal force of the planet's rapid spin made it tolerable to men. The space-trained muscles of the Planeteers quickly began to adjust themselves to the greater load, though they felt very slow and heavy.

With their keen knives of Earth steelite they hacked and slashed at the repulsive bodies of the *sliths*, digging the huge white fangs out. Those teeth, the hardest and most perdurable organic substance in the system, were in high demand on all worlds for carving into jewelry and for certain industrial processes. The system-wide demand for them was responsible for the fact that *slith*-hunting was a profession on this world.

Dawn was rapidly filtering through the mists about them. The brief five-hour night of Saturn was ending.

"Curse these cold fogs!" muttered Sual Av, his teeth chattering as he worked. "I wouldn't trade one hot, steamy swamp of Venus for all these outer worlds."

"If you liked that mud-puddle native world of yours so much, why did you leave it?" demanded Gunner.

They had the last of the teeth out, and were putting them into the pouches at their belts, when Thorn suddenly sprang to his feet, gripping his heavy atom-gun.

"Stand by, boys, and don't show any excitement," he said in a low, rapid voice.

Through the chill, dawn-lit mists of the fungus forest toward the three comrades were coming a dozen green-faced Saturnians, all heavily armed.

CHAPTER XI

Secret Police

JOHN THORN perceived that the approaching Saturnians were *slith*-hunters. They were a rough-looking crew, wearing stained leather and carrying heavy atom-guns. In their lead was a hulking man of middle age who hailed the Planeteers in a hull voice.

"What luck, friends?" he called jovially. "I see you've got a few *sliths*, at least."

"A few is right," John Thorn answered ruefully. "We've been roaming the fungi for days, and these are the first teeth we've got."

Thorn was careful to speak with the heavy Saturnian accent. The language of all the system's peoples is the same, since all are descended from the original colonizing Earth stock. But each world has developed its characteristic accent.

Sual Av and Gunner Welk had risen to their feet. They stood, casually wiping the gray blood of the slain *sliths* from their leather jackets as the Saturnians came up.

"I'm Kriho," announced the hulking leader of the newcomers in his hull voice. "I thought I knew all the hunters in these parts, but you lads are new."

Thorn nodded. "We came down here from Karies, figuring the hunting might be better here. Instead, it's worse."

Kriho nodded his big head in emphatic agreement. "Aye, it's getting

so a hunter can't make a living in these parts," he boomed. "Too near Saturnopolis, I guess."

He slapped a hulging pouch at his helt. "Anyway, we've made a fair haul of teeth and we're on our way hack to Saturnopolis. Want a lift in our rocket-plane?"

John Thorn's pulses leaped at the offer. Here was a quick way to get into the Saturnian capital in company that would nullify suspicion. But he frowned douhtfully, and looked questioningly at the other two Planeteers beside him.

"What about it?" he asked them. "Shall we pull out of these forests with what few teeth we have?"

"I say yes," growled Gunner Welk disgustedly, in Saturnian accents. "This section isn't as good hunting as where we came from."

Sual Av nodded his agreement. "I want to see a few lights and get a few drinks, after two weeks like we've had."

"Ho, ho!" guffawed the hulking Kribo. "Don't he so down-hearted about your bad luck, lads. It'll change soon, sure."

The disguised Planeteers trudged through the towering fungi with their new-found friends. Thorn and his two comrades had to exert all their strength to keep from showing the dragging, leaden effect of the Saturnian gravitation upon them.

The wan, sickly dsy of Saturn had come. The little, far-off disk of the sun was rising rapidly to cast its thin, feehle rays upon the looming gray fungi and spongy gray mosses. Across the dusky sky, the incredihle arc of the rings soared stupendously. The usual cold morning rain was dripping from the mists hy the time they reached the rocket-plane.

Kribo's vehicle proved an ancient, hattered one whose glassite windows were cracked and whose inertrum power-chamber had heen strained, and crudely reinforced with chromaloy bands.

As they piled into the tuhulsr body, Thorn hoped fervently that thst power-chamber would not choose to let go at this particular time.

KRIBO started the antique machine, and it lurched crazily up from the fungus forest into the rainy mists. The Saturnian turned to Thorn with a large, ostentatious air.

"I suppose you're wondering where a *slith*-hunter got money enough to huy a fine rocket-plane like this," he hoomed to Thorn over the irregular roar of defective tubes. "The fact is that me and my hoys here own it together."

"It's a fine machine," Thorn said admiringly. "I always hoped to own one. But times are hard for a hunter."

"Aye, and getting harder," growled the hulking Ssturnian. "Since this war-scare cut off all trade with the inner worlds, the price of teeth has gone down almost to nothing. When the war really starts, our market will he gone altogether."

A youthful Saturnisn behind them spoke up, his face flushed with patriotic ardor.

"You forget, Kribo, that once we have conquered the Inner Alliance and have sccess to the rich resources of those worlds, we'll all be prosperous. The Chairman has said so, hasn't he? And the Chairman is always right."

"Oh, sure, the Chairman is always right," hastily hoomed Kribo, with a douhtful glance at the Planeteers.

It was the slogan of the four League worlds, Thorn knew, the formula that Haskell Trask, the dictator, had impressed almost hypnotically upon his followers. Everyone in the rocket-plane, to show his patriotism, hastened to repeat it.

"The Chairman is alwsys right," they chorused together, the Planeteers joining in.

Sual Av choked over a sneeze that sounded suspiciously like a chuckle, and Thorn shot the disguised Venusian a furious glance.

Thorn guessed after a little while that they were approaching Saturnopolis. The city was not yet visible through the misty rain, hut helow them now lay vast cultivated groves of the queer fungus-fruits developed on this world. Many workers could he seen down there, toiling and plodding through the cold, dripping rain.

Saturnopolis came into sight, low on the distant horizon ahead. Underneath the dusky daylight sky, framed by the colossal shining arch of the rings, the metropolis showed as a great mass of low black structures. A square, terraced black fortress rose near the center of the city, vague and distant in the miats.

John Thorn's hands clenched aa he glimpsed, miles north of the capital, the huge expanse of an enormous spaceport. He could make out rows of hundreds on hundreds of battle-cruisers parked there, and others landing or taking off. That hive of swarming activity, he knew, was the main base at which most of the ships of the League navies were gathering for the coming attack on the Alliance.

Kribo had followed Thorn's intent gaze. The booming voice of the hunter startled the disguised young Earthman.

"They say any rocket-plane that flies within five miles of that spaceport is gunned down," Kribo declared. "I always give the place a wide berth."

Thorn nodded. For the moment, as he stered at the gathering armada that was intended to carry conquest and destruction to the inner worlds, he could not trust himself to speak.

"Here we are," boomed Kribo a few minutes later. He added proudly, "It didn't take long in *this* machine, did it?"

THEIR rocket-plane was gliding down over the flat, black roofa of the city. They poised in the rainy mist, edged into a descent-level, and presently came down on a parking-roof.

Kribo turned genially to Thorn and his comrades as the party of *slith*-hunters emerged from the battered machine.

"You three lads come along with us to Mother Bombey's place," he boomed. "It's our favorite drinking-spot here."

"Sorry, we can't," Thorn told him. "We're out of money, and these few teeth we have won't bring more than enough to pay our way back to Karies."

"Who said you would need money?" demanded Kribo indignantly. "I'm paying for everything, lads. I know what it is to come back from a hard trip with only a handful of teeth."

Thorn thought rapidly. He had a plan for seeking Lana, but could not try it until night came. The Planeteers would be safer if they atayed off the streets in the meantime.

"All right, we're your men if you're paying," he told Kribo with a grin, as they descended to the atreet.

Saturnopolia looked a dreary place in the sickly daylight beneath the falling rain. The cold mists that fogged its streets were bone-chilling. Through the streets roared rocket-cars, and the pedestrian-walks were crowded with the Saturnian populace and with hordes of officers and men of the four League navies. The four-circle emblem of the League was showing everywhere, and it was clearly evident that Haskell Trask had whipped the people to war-fever.

Far away across the city there rose

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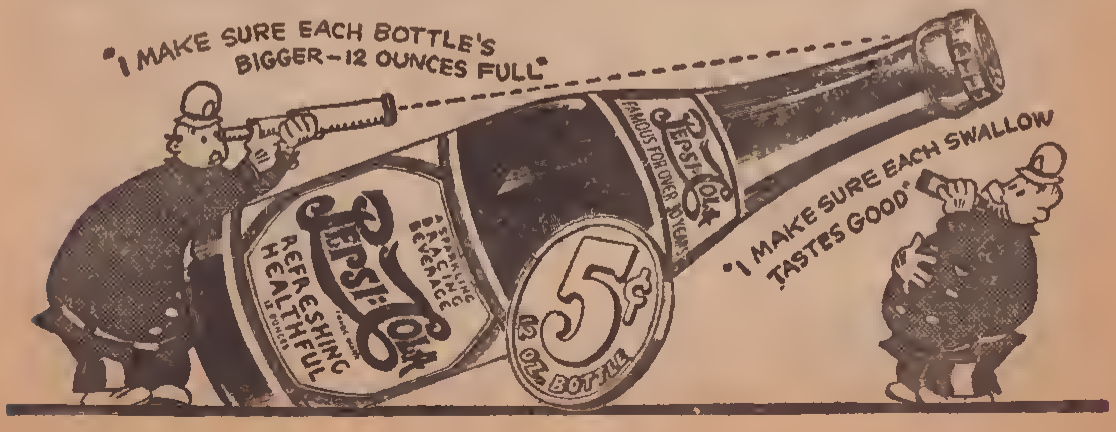

from the ruck of low, black cement buildings the huge, terraced square pile that dominated everything. It had been built two centuries before, as the seat of the Saturnian government. Now, Thorn knew, it was the guarded citadel in which the ruthless dictator of the League of Cold Worlds lived and worked and wove his plans of conquest.

Sual Av and Gunner Welk pressed close beside Thorn as the noisy hunters pushed through the crowded streets.

The Mercurian, glancing at the distant, frowning pile, spoke guardedly in deep undertones.

"The girl will he in that fortress, John. And I still don't see how we can hope even to get in there."

"We'll get in," Thorn muttered with grim determination. "I've been here before, and I have a plan."

"It'll have to be damned good to get us past the net of secret police around that place," whispered Gunner.

Thorn's eyes clung with fierce intensity to the looming, mist-vague fortress. Somewhere behind those forbidding walls was the pirate girl who was the focus of all his thoughts. What tortures were Haskell Trask and his fat spymaster using upon her to make her reveal the secret of Erebus?

"Here we are!" boomed Kribo, stopping in a dingy cross-street. He pushed through a door, the others following.

Thorn perceived that Mother Bombey's was a shabby rendezvous, with a drinking-counter, tables, and a few "happiness vibration" booths. Krypton lamps lit the place, a few "glowers" dispelled the chill, and it was more than crowded with rough *slith*-hunters.

"Welcome, Kribo!" roared a dozen voices. "What luck this time?"

"Fair, boys, fair," answered the hulking hunter complacently. He turned. "Meet some lads from up in Karies."

He pointed to the disguised Planeteers, introducing them to the crowd by the false names that Thorn had given him.

A HARD-FACED, ample-figured old Saturnian bag reached over the drinking-counter with an outstretched hand.

"Pass over the guns, Kribo," she ordered harshly.

"This is Mother Bombey," Kribo told Thorn with a grin. "She makes us check our guns when we come in, so that our little arguments won't wreck the place."

Thorn made no objection to handing over the heavy atom-guns, for he and Sual Av and Gunner Welk retained their atom-pistols inside their jackets.

"Drinks or vibrations for everybody!" ordered Kribo, slapping down a platinum coin with a lordly gesture.

Thorn ordered fungus wine, which he knew was the Saturnian favorite. Sual Av and Gunner Welk followed his lead.

"Here's better times and plenty teeth for every hunter!" proposed Kribo, quaffing the pale liquor.

John Thorn could not help liking the hulking hunter. He sensed that here was a representative of the real population of the League worlds, hard-working, fundamentally decent people all, when not whipped up to war fever by an ambitious dictator's inflammatory lies.

Two hours went past in the crowded, noisy place. Thorn had been forced to swallow more of the musty, powerful fungus wine than he wanted, and he was glad when night fell outside, for Kribo was a little drunk and was giving him a candid opinion of the political situation. And a thin-faced Saturnian nearly seemed to be listening.

"The Chairman keeps saying we've got to arm to the teeth and take territory from the inner worlds because we're poor," Kribo declared. "But it seems to me we're poor because we spend everything on this big fleet of battle-cruisers we've built."

"Shut up, Kribo," Thorn warned anxiously. "That kind of talk will get you into trouble."

Kribo winked at him. "It's all right, lad—I know you feel the same way. I

saw your partner choke off a laugh on our way here, when we said, 'The Chairman is always right.'"

Thorn knew the peril of such talk, and determined the time bad come for the Planeteers to get started, since it was already full night outside. Sual Av and Gunner rose quickly at his nod.

"We've got to be on our way, Kribo," Thorn told the big hunter. "Tbanks a lot for what you've done for us."

He and his two comrades started for the door. But the thin-faced Saturnian he had noticed barred their way.

"Stand where you are!" snapped this individual. "You tbree and that hunter are under arrest—authority of the SP."

As he spoke, the thin-faced Saturnian turned back his jacket to show a viridium badge with the dreaded emblem.

"Secret police!" gasped Kribo, his face livid.

The whole place was frozen with terror, every man staring silently, for througbout the four worlds of the League, the secret police of Haskell Trask was a name to inspire fright.

The SP man was drawing a pocket-audio from his jacket. So sure was he of the power of his organization's name that he had not troubled to draw a weapon.

"You'll get a year in the mines of Pluto for your subversive talk," he told Thorn and the others with thin-lipped satisfaction. Then he spoke into the little audio. "Forty-three-twelve calling beadquarters. Send—"

Thorn's fist crashed on his jaw, at that moment. Tbe SP man went down in a crumpled heap, and a cry of fear and horror went up from the crowd in the place.

"Come on, Kribo!" yelled Thorn, grabbing the dazed hunter's arm. He rushed out into the street, Sual Av and the Mercurian at his heels.

THE four of them plunged down the dark, dingy little thoroughfare, hearing an excited roar of voices from behind. The streets were far less crowded now, and the mists had cleared a little with the stopping of the rain. The stupendous bow of the rings blazed white overhead, and Titan was rising.

"Good God, we're all in for it now!" gasped Kribo as they stopped a few blocks away. "You hit an SP man!"

"We'll take care of ourselves," Thorn rapped. "You'd better get back out into your fungus forests and stay there till this blows over."

Kribo grasped at the suggestion eagerly. He gripped Thorn's hand a moment in his huge paw.

"Thanks for pulling me out of there, lad," he said fervently, and then hastened away.

Thorn started with his two comrades in a run through the darker cross-streets, heading toward the huge pile of the distant citadel that frowned black against the stars.

"This is fine—this makes things perfect!" Gunner Welk was growling as they ran. "Now we've got all the secret police in Saturnopolis looking for us. That's all we needed."

"Shut up and keep running," Thorn panted. "We've got to get into the citadel before the SP net picks us up."

"Get into the citadel?" cried the Mercurian. "Are you still crazy enough to think we can?"

"You talk too much, Gunner," langhed Sual Av breathlessly. "Save your wind—you'll need it."

They were all gasping from the strain of their efforts against tbe greater gravitation wben John Thorn halted at the corner of two dark streets of warehouses, a mile from the citadel.

Thorn looked swiftly around to make sure they were unobserved, then stooped and tugged at something in the cement paving. It was a chromaloy metal plate that came loose to reveal a dark, yawning cavity below.

"Quick, down with you!" he ordered.

Bewilderedly, the Venusian and Mercurian dropped down through the aperture. Thorn followed, quickly replacing the plate above them.

They were in dank, absolute darkness, bitterly cold. But Thorn got out his fluorie flash-lamp and its little red beam showed they stood in a big cement tube at whose bottom ran a stream of icy water.

"This is one of the city's drains," Thorn said rapidly. "They have to have a whole network of them, to run off the water from these perpetual rains. I learned about them when I first visited Saturn with an official Earth mission, years ago before Haskell Trask came to power.

"There are drains beneath the citadel that opens out into these main ones," Thorn continued tautly. "That's our way into the palace!"

"Up the drains?" Sual Av said startledly. "Why, I never thought of any way as simple as that."

"It's *too* simple," rasped Gunner Welk. "Do you think these people are so dumb that they won't have planted some kind of death-trap to keep intruders from entering the citadel thus?"

Thorn's jaw hardened. "We'll have to take that chance. Lana's in there, and this is our only way in to her."

He started along the great drain, the red beam lighting their way. The cold, dank air and the icy water they splashed through were freezing. Shadowy things scuttled away ahead of the Planeteers, as they pushed on through the gloomy tunnels toward the guarded stronghold of the dictator.

CHAPTER XII

Citadel of Fear

JOHN THORN paused. They had been following the huge drain for half an hour, and had now reached a point where a smaller drain-tube opened into it from the right.

"This must be one of the citadel drains," Thorn muttered, flashing his red beam up it. "Come on, we'll soon find out."

"We'd better not stay down in this maze of pipes too long," warned Sual Av. "The rains will start again when dawn comes, and these tubes will be full of rushing water."

John Thorn was clambering into the smaller side drain. It was so small that he had to go forward in it on hands and knees. It sloped very gently upward, and its floor was damp.

He led the way, the little red beam of his fluoric lamp lighting him forward. Sual Av followed him closely, and the big Mercurian brought up the rear.

Thorn guessed that by now they must be passing under the wall of the great fortress. His hopes were running high. So far, they had met no barrier.

Then suddenly, Thorn met the barrier. And he almost died before he realized it.

The little tubular fluoric lamp he held outstretched in front of him suddenly flared red hot, its chromaloy case starting instantly to *melt*. Thorn recoiled with a smothered exclamation of pain and surprise, dropping the red-hot thing. They were plunged into absolute darkness.

"What is it?" exclaimed Sual Av anxiously.

"I don't know—something ahead melted my lamp before I could draw back," Thorn answered, his voice wire-taut in the darkness. "Pass me your lamp, Sual. We've run into some devilish trap!"

The Venusian passed his lamp forward. Thorn, without venturing any farther forward, snicked on the beam.

The red ray quivered up the gently sloping black cement tube. Thorn stared tensely. There was nothing ahead—nothing except a row of small holes across the curved floor of the drain, and a similar row of holes in the roof exactly above.

"I can't see anything," said Sual Av. "Your lamp must have burned out accidentally."

"Wait," said Thorn tensely.

He tore a bit of cloth from his jacket, and cautiously pushed it forward until it was over one of the row of holes. Instantly the cloth burst into flame and vanished in fine ashes.

John Thorn felt cold sweat stand out on his brow. He knew now the invisible death he had nearly blundered into.

"There's a web of heat-beams here across the drain," he said hoarsely. "A little trap fixed up by Haskell Trask's

guards for anyone who might try to enter the citadel this way."

The nature of the diabolical trap was clear. Buried somewhere near the cement drain was a generator of heat-beams—those "focused" rays of radiant heat which were produced in a mirrored inertrum chamber by transformation of atomic energy into vibratory force in the proper octaves. Such beams had an effective range of only a few feet, but were deadly within that distance.

"The beams are projected through three holes in the floor and disappear through the holes in the roof of the drain, to be dissipated above," Thorn said. "It's a fiendishly clever idea. Anyone crawling up this drain would never see anything until he blundered into those beams that would sear through and kill him instantly."

"Hell, we can't pass this until we find some way to shut off these beams!" swore Gunner Welk from behind.

THORN frowned tensely. "We can't get at the generator of them," he muttered. "That must be located outside the drain. It would take lots of tools and time to dig down to it."

"Inertrum is proof against high heat," Sual Av said hopefully. "If we had some inertrum plugs to stop those holes the beams come up through—"

"That's fine," rasped Gunner angrily. "Now all we have to do is to go back out in the city, order a nice set of inertrum plugs, and come back here with them. The secret police out there wouldn't think of bothering us while we're doing all that."

"Shut up, Gunner," Thorn said. "I've an idea which might work."

He fumbled in the pouch that was still attached to his belt. Out of it he drew the gleaming white *slith* teeth they had taken from the monsters they had slain in the fungus forest. There were a dozen of the teeth, long, conical fangs an inch across at the root.

"These *slith* teeth might do the trick," Thorn muttered. "They're one of the hardest and most perdurable substances in the system, remember—almost as hard as inertrum. If we plugged the heat-beam apertures with these—"

"They couldn't last more than a few seconds before the beams burned them out!" Sual Av exclaimed.

"A few seconds ought to be enough for us to get past," Thorn retorted. He hesitated, then added, "The last man will run the most danger. We'll back down to the main drain, and I'll take the rear position."

"You'll not!" Gunner Welk declared. "Hell's name, do you want to play around in these slimy pipes all night? Go ahead and put the teeth in those holes, and let's get on—if it works."

"All right," Thorn said grimly. "When I give the word, jump after me as fast as you can, and *don't* knock any of the teeth out of the holes!"

Thorn rapidly prepared for their precarious stratagem. There were six holes around the perimeter of the drain from which the deadly, invisible beams emerged. He took the six most regularly-shaped of his *slith*-teeth, and laid them in readiness.

Then with the end of his lamp, Thorn swiftly pushed the teeth into place. As each big white tooth was shoved forward, it became a conical plug to close the beam-aperture. By the time the sixth tooth was tamped into place, the first one was already charring and smelling.

"Come on!" Thorn cried, and plunged forward in a scrambling leap through the teeth-plugged circle of holes.

Sual Av followed instantly, the Venusian's wigged head butting into Thorn's back. A moment later, Gunner Welk caromed into the Venusian from behind with battering force.

"Jacket's—on fire!" gasped the Mercurian, beating at his side. A smell of scorched cloth filled the dank air.

There was a frantic squirming in the cramped tunnel as the other two Planeteers tried to help Gunner beat out his smoldering jacket. He and Sual Av soon had it extinguished.

"Are you hurt, Gunner?" Thorn asked anxiously.

"No—just my side scorched a little," panted the Mercurian. "One of

those teeth burned clear out just as I jumped. It's lucky it was one on the side instead of in the middle!"

Thorn glanced back past them. The *slith*-teeth with which he had plugged the apertures had vanished. Even that super-hard substance had been charred away in a few seconds by the beams.

"Let's get on," growled the Mercurian in a moment. "These damned drains aren't exactly a pleasure resort."

AGAIN Thorn started forward on hands and knees, lighting the way with his red beam. He moved with extreme caution, alert to detect the presence of another invisible, deadly web.

But they met no more such barriers. Presently they reached a place where the drain forked into five smaller tubes.

"Which one?" whispered Sual Av to him.

"We'll each take one, trace it and come back and meet here," Thorn muttered. "One of them ought to lead to the dungeons."

Thorn crawled into the right drain-tube. It was so small he had to inch forward by creeping. It slanted upward also.

Blue light finally glimmered ahead. Thorn extinguished his lamp and stealthily crawled on. He came to the end of the drain, which was closed by inertrum bars set in the cement, over his head.

Cautiously he peered upward. The grating over him was set in the cement paving of a large court surrounded on all sides by the dark, towering mass of the citadel. Krypton lamps cast a blue glow on spaceships parked in the court, three swift-lined small cruisers. Two armed guards paced to and fro beside them.

"Haskell Trask's personal space-cruisers," Thorn muttered to himself.

He backed down to the fork where the drains diverged. Gunner Welk and Sual Av were just emerging there also.

"The dungeons are up there at the end of that pipe!" Sual Av whispered excitedly, pointing to the second drain.

"Come on, then," Thorn said swiftly.

He led the way, all three of them crawling up the narrow pipe the Venusian had explored. Its opening, also, was barred by inertrum bars set in the cement.

Thorn peered up through the bars into a short blue-lit corridor, along whose walls were the inertrum doors of cells. Almost all of the cells seemed unoccupied, their doors half-open. No prisoner stayed long in Haskell Trask's dreaded private dungeon!

"It's Trask's dungeon, all right," Thorn whispered. "And no guards in sight. Go back down the pipe a little."

The other two Planeteers obeyed, all three backing down the tube a little way. Thorn drew his pistol, sighted carefully at the grating above, and pulled the trigger.

The little atom-shell exploded in a small, brilliant flare of atomic energy, with a thudding reverberation. The flare burned away a mass of cement at one side of the grating, completely exposing the ends of the imbedded inertrum bars.

Thorn clambered eagerly up to the grating at once. At the same moment he heard a cry of alarm from up in the corridor. Two Saturnian guards came rushing out of one of the cells, dropping a flask of fungus-wine they had been secretly drinking, and drawing their atom-pistols. The thud of the atom-shell had roused them.

They saw Thorn's head below the grating and fired at him instantly. Their shells struck the floor in front of the grating and a flare of blinding light and scorching heat hit Thorn's face. He fired his own atom-pistol, triggering quickly. More flares of energy burst brilliantly beside the two Saturnian guards, down the corridor.

The two green-faced soldiers crumpled and lay still, in a scorched and lifeless heap. Thorn waited, his face wild in the pale blue light, gripping his weapon. But the swift thudding of the shells was not followed by any further alarm.

"Tbose must be the only guards on duty inside the dungeon," Thorn panted, tearing away the freed inertrum bars with quivering hands.

THE Planeteers scrambled hastily up out of the drain into the short single corridor of tbe dungeon.

"Listen! I hear someone!" Sual Av exclaimed.

Then the other two comradea heard. It was a voice from the farther end of the corridor, a distant, monotonous, strangely metallic voice speaking on and on.

"—Erehus—won't think of Erehua —think of anything but Erehus— won't think of Erebus—"

Thorn started wildly. "Erebus? That must he Lana talking! Come on!"

"It didn't sound like a human voice," Gunner muttered, as he and the Venusian raced after Thorn.

They leaped over the scorched bodies of tbe dead Saturnians, and on down the corridor. The voice came from the last cell in the passage. Now they heard it more clearly, and it was not a human voice. It spoke in cold, metallic, inflectionless tones, on and on witbout stopping.

"—mustn't think of Erebus— mustn't think of the secret! Keep my mind on something else—"

Tborn reached the door of that last cell. He peered through the little grating in the inertrum door. And his brown face froze, his eyea widened wildly, at wbat be saw.

"Good God, it's Lana!" he whispered hoarsely. "They've got a psychopbone attached to ber!"

The cell into which Thorn wildly gazed was a windowless cubicle, lit by a single krypton lamp in the ceiling. Under the uncanny blue glow, in a metal chair to which her arma and legs were tightly strapped, sat Lana Cain. Tbe girl'a slender little figure was sagging in her bonds, her eyes were closed, her white face infinitely weary and exhausted. It was not Lana who was speaking, but the complex machine that was attached to her head.

Tiny, needlelike incisions had heen made in the base of Lana's skull. From tbem, two thin black wires ran upward to the mechanism suapended above her, a compact complexity of transformers and vacuum tubes, upon which was mounted an audio-speaker.

The metallic, monotonous voice came from that audio-speaker. It was still speaking steadily on, and everything it aaid was being taken down, upon the moving tape of a recorder whose microphone hung in front of the speaker.

"Think of something else," the metallic voice came from the speaker as tbe Planeteers listened. "Think of the Zone—of Stilicho—of my father—"

"A psychophone!" repeated Sual Av, wide-eyed. "So that's bow Trask is trying to get the secret of Erehus from Lana!"

Thorn too was thunderstruck hy the ingenuity of the means being used to aecure the girl'a secret knowledge.

The psychophone waa a mechanism that made thougbt *audible*. Once it was connected to a subject's nerve-centers, every conscious thought in that subject's hrain was translated into mechanical speech by the machine and spoken sloud. That was accomplished by transmitting the tiny electrical neural currents of the subject's thought-impulses into a complex scanner, in which the particular vibration of each thougbt actuated the nearest word or phrase that expressed that tbought, in the phono-recorded vocabulary of the thing.

The machine was the recent and little-known invention of a Venuaian psychologist. It was a far-advanced adaptation of the ancient encephalograph, tbe device used by Earth scientista as far back as the third decade of the twentieth century to record thought as a varying electrical vihration.

LANA CAIN was sitting silent, her eyes closed, but every thought that passed througb her mind was being remorselessly translated and spoken aloud by the mechanism above her head, and taken down hy the recorder so that it could he studied later at leisure. She could not posaihly

keep from thinking, and whatever she thought, the psychophone spoke forth.

"—my father," the mechanical voice was speaking on as Thorn and his comrades peered incredulously. "Wish my father were alive. He would get me out of here. He would—"

"Lana!" Thorn whispered tensely into the cell.

The girl opened her eyes. Their blue depths were wells of utter weariness and hopelessness as she stared at Thorn's face through the grating in the door.

Her face hardened in bitter hatred as she looked at him. She said nothing, but the psychophone's mechanical voice spoke her thoughts.

"Saturnian — hate all Saturnians, now. Green faces peering at me—trying to make me think of Erebus—"

Thorn, for a moment stunned by her bitter reaction, suddenly understood. He and his comrades, the green stain on their faces, were still disguised as Saturnians.

"Lana, it's I—John Thorn!" he said hoarsely. "It's the Planeteers!"

Lana stared unbelievingly. Then as she recognized his features, her tired eyes lit with incredulous joy.

"John Thorn?" she whispered. That was all that came from her lips.

But from the psychophone overhead, there sounded her thoughts in that metallic voice.

"John Thorn, I love you! I love you!"

CHAPTER XIII

Dictator of Worlds

THE girl's white face flushed crimson, as the machine over her head blared forth her secret thoughts. Then she raised her gold head and looked at Thorn with brave steadiness.

"I would not have told you, John Thorn," she whispered. "But since the psychophone has spoken it, I must admit it—I do love you."

Thorn's green-stained face worked, and in the rush of his mingled emotions, it was a moment before he could speak.

"Lana, I love you, too," he said unsteadily. "I have, since that night of the feast at Turkoon."

"You do?" she whispered, incredulous, wondering joy dawning in her eyes. "You do, John Thorn?"

There was a long moment in which Lana's shining blue eyes clung to his, as he stared through the door-grating. And in that moment, the psychophone attached to the girl was speaking metallically on, stiltedly trying to voice her rush of joyous emotions.

Sual Av stirred restlessly beside Thorn. He and Gunner Welk had listened in silence until now.

"John, we'd better not be lingering here," the Venusian cautioned.

"Yes, this is no place for love talk," rumbled Gunner. "God help us if Cheerly catches us here before we get Lana out!"

"Cheerly!" The psychophone spoke the girl's blazing thought as she heard the name. "I hate that traitor!"

"Lana, what have Cheerly and Haskell Trask done to you?" Thorn exclaimed, his face hardening. "Have they harmed you?"

"Since they brought me here they've had this psychophone attached to me," Lana said bitterly. "All these days I've sat here trying not to think of the secret of Erebus that they want. And I've known that sooner or later I'd slip and think of it."

Each time Lana spoke, the psychophone was metallically speaking also, voicing the thought behind her words.

"They mustn't get that secret!" she cried. "On the way here I learned by overhearing Cheerly's talk, why they want it. There's a mass of radite on Erebus, and that's what they're after. They plan to use that radite against the Alliance in their coming attack. They intend to make atomic bombs of the radite!"

"Radite bombs?" exclaimed Thorn, his face blanching under its stain. "Good God, one atomic bomb charged with that super-powerful stuff would destroy a whole metropolis!"

"Then *that* is the terrible new agent of destruction we heard the League

was planning!" hissed Gunner Welk.

"That is why Haskell Trask is delaying his attack on the Alliance until he gets the radite from Erebus!" Lana exclaimed. "He wants to follow up his expected naval victory by a terrific bombing that will break all the inner world's resistance. That's why I'd rather die then give them the secret of Erebus!"

The girl looked at John Thorn through the grating with pleading earnestness in her worn white face.

"John, I told you I hated Earth for what it had done to my father, that its fate didn't concern me. But when I heard what Trask plans to do to Earth and the other Alliance planets, I realized Earth is still my native world, that I *couldn't* let that happen.

"And it's your native world, too, John. Even though you Planeteers are outlaws, you're bound to the inner worlds by blood and birth just as I am. We mustn't let Trask's plan succeed!"

NOW was the moment to explain.

"Lana, we Planeteers are not really outlaws at all!" Thorn said eagerly. "We're secret agents of the Alliance, and we're after that radite on Erebus because it can save the Alliance from defeat when the League attacks."

"Then I'll *tell* you the secret of Erebus!" the girl cried joyfully. "If it means saving the Alliance worlds from conquest, as you say—"

"Hush, Lana! Don't think of it now! Wait!"

Sual Av had been searching the bodies of the two slain guards. The Venusian hastened back now to Thorn's side.

"John, there's no wave-key on those guards," he reported anxiously. "How are we going to get Lana out?"

"We'll have to break through this cell-door somehow!" Thorn exclaimed urgently.

"Break through an inertrum door?" said Gunner Welk incredulously.

A quick examination of the door justified the big Mercurian's doubt. The heavy inertrum of the door would resist even their atom-pistols. And the wave-lock was wholly invulnerable.

"We've got to get her out *somehow!*" Thorn cried.

"John, listen to me," said Lana quickly. "You can't get me out. But you Planeteers can get away, by the way you came. I'll tell you the secret of Erebua, the way to land on that world aafely, and you three can get away and go there and lift the radite. Even though Cheerly and Trask read the secret from the psychophone record, you'll have a start on them."

"But we can't leave you here, Lana!" Thorn cried desperately. "Just when you and I have found each other—"

"You must!" she declared, her blue eyes bright with purpose. "What is my safety against that of all the inner worlds?"

"She's right, John," said Sual Av in a low, strained voice. "God knows I hate to go and leave her here. But remember, we promised the Earth Chairman we'd do *anything* to get that radite."

[*Turn page*]

CLOTHESPIN NOSE

Sensational *extra* help for colds—with Luden's! These famous cough drops not only help soothe throat, but release a menthol vapor—which, with every breath, helps penetrate clogged nasal passages, helps relieve "clothespin nose!"

"We've got to do it, yes," muttered Gunner. His huge fists clenched. "But we'll come back, and if they've harmed her—"

John Thorn faced crucial decision, his mind torn hy conflicting emotions. His heart throhhed with desperate anxiety for Lana. Yet clear before him came the weary face of the Earth Chairman, telling him the Alliance's last hope was in the Planeteers.

"We'll—do it," Thorn said hoarsely. He could not say more. He could only stare haggardly into Lana's eyes.

"Then listen to the secret of Erehus that my father told me, John!" the girl cried. "It is doom, hideous and ghastly doom, to land anywhere on Erehus except—"

"Listen!" Sual Av cried suddenly. "Someone is coming!"

From heyond the locked door at the end of the short corridor came a sound of voices and approaching footsteps.

"It must be the captain of guards on his inspection!" exclaimed Lana fearfully.

"No time to get hack to that drain!" Thorn rapped. "Quick, into one of these cells! Drag those hodies in, too!"

In an instant, he and the Venusian and Mercurian had seized the scorched bodies of the two dead guards and had dragged them into an empty cell across the corridor from Lana's cell. As they swung shut the door of their hiding place, the door at the end of the corridor opened, and men entered the prison.

JOHN THORN, peering through the grating in the door of the hiding place, stiffened in every muscle as he saw the men. One of them was a tall Saturnian captain of guards. Another was an ohese, waddling figure with a puffy green face and piglike little eyes—Jenk Cheerly.

But it was the third man of the group, the one who strode in front, upon whom Thorn's eyes riveted. This man was a middle-aged Saturnian of tall stature, with a bony, nervous green face and very deep, dark eyes that stared gloomily straight ahead.

"Haskell Trask!" murmured Sual Av in Thorn's ear, his faint whisper surcharged with excitement.

Haskell Trask, self-appointed Leader of the League of Cold Worlds, ahsolute dictator of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune! Thorn's pulse pounded at sight of that hony, nervous face.

"Why are no guards on duty here as I ordered?" Jenk Cheerly was asking the captain of guards in his squeaky voice.

"I did station two here, sir," replied the officer worriedly to the fat spymaster. "They must have sneaked out for some reason. I'll have them courtmartialed for it."

"I should have put my own Secret Police here instead of depending on you," said Cheerly in vicious anger. "You've failed in your duty, Captain."

"No man must fail in his duty now!" declared Haskell Trask in his harsh, high, fanatical voice. "In this great hour when we approach our fated destiny, every man in the League worlds must give his all for the tremendous and glorious work that faces us!"

Haskell Trask spoke as though he were exhorting a crowd of thousands, his voice incongruously declamatory. His gloomy eyes flashed with a deep fire, his tall, hony figure rigid.

John Thorn felt a chill as he heard. The voice and face of Trask were those of a madman, a man utterly convinced of the rightness of his actions and the wickedness of his enemies.

The captain hurried ahead to the door of Lana's cell and was turning the invisible heam of a wave-key on its lock. Trask and the fat Uranian spymaster halted and waited.

"John, we can gun down Trask from here!" Sual Av whispered excitedly, tensely fingering his atom-pistol.

"No—killing Trask now wouldn't stop the League, for there are a hundred of his underlings ready to take his place," Thorn muttered tautly. "Wait! I've a hetter plan."

The door of Lana's cell clicked open. Watching through the grating, the Planeteers saw the dictator stride into the girl's prison-room, followed hy Jenk Cheerly and the captain.

"—almost morning. Days and nights are so short on Saturn," the psychophone was speaking forth Lana's thoughts.

Thorn understood. Lana was trying to avoid giving away the presence of the Planeteers, hy thinking of other things.

Haskell Trask surveyed the girl hound in the chair, his gloomy eyes meeting her defiant blue ones.

"Are you ready yet to tell us what we want to know, girl?" he demanded harshly.

Lana made no vocal answer. But the psychophone spoke her thoughts.

"I'll never tell them! Never!"

Trask's nervous face twitched violently and he seemed seized hy a raging passion. He flung his arms out widely.

"Everything is against me in my great task—everything!" he cried with theatrical self-pity. "But I shall persevere and conquer in spite of everything! The system shall see!"

"Perhaps the girl has given away the secret to the psychophone hy now, sir," Jenk Cheerly suggested hastily. "Shall I examine the record?"

TRASK nodded curtly. The fat spymaster reached up and touched a switch of the recorder. Instantly from it hegan speaking the recorded thoughts of Lana, as spoken by the psychophone in the preceding hours and phonographically recorded on the tape.

John Thorn soundlessly opened the door behind which he and his comrades were hidden, and whispered tautly to them.

"Come on—but don't shoot Trask, yet!"

Haskell Trask and Cheerly were so intently listening to the record that they did not see the armed Planeteers appear silently at the open door of the cell. But the captain saw, and uttered a startled cry. Trask and the fat spymaster spun around.

"Hands high!" John Thorn rapped, his atom-pistol leveled. "Quick, or we'll blast you down!"

Stupefiedly, the three men in the cell raised their hands. Haskell Trask's bony face went livid with rage.

"You dare turn weapons upon me!" he choked to the disguised Planeteers. "Upon me, your Leader!"

But Cheerly's pig eyes suddenly widened as the fat spymaster's gaze searched Thorn's green-stained face.

"These aren't men of ours, sir!" he cried to the dictator. "I know them—they're the Three Planeteers!"

"The Planeteers!" exclaimed Trask. His deep eyes blazed. "The outlaws whose brazen rohheries have made us so much trouhle in the past, who have stolen so many of our secrets—"

Thorn interrupted in a hard, cold voice. "Take their guns, Sual Av. Gunner, release Lana. Careful with those nerve connections."

In a moment the girl was freed, and the Venusian had the weapons of Cheerly and the captain. Trask had been unarmed.

"We're going out of here with this girl," Thorn told the Saturnians icily. "We're going to that court nearby where the space-cruisers are parked. You three are going to lead us there, hy the shortest and least-used route. If we are challenged by anybody, or if there is any alarm, your Leader here will die first."

The captain gasped with horror at the threat, and Cheerly's pig eyes narrowed. But Trask's hony face was unmoved.

"You cannot kill me," the dictator told Thorn harshly. "Destiny has reserved me for a great work."

"My trigger-finger can change destiny pretty quick, Saturnian!" warned Gunner Welk, his voice throbbing with hate.

Thorn motioned to the door at the end of the corridor.

"Get going, and remember my warning! Lana, keep heside me."

They started, Haskell Trask and Cheerly and the captain moving with hands upraised, the Planeteers following with weapons leveled. Lana staggered, her limbs numhed hy long confinement in her honds, the back of her head aching. Thorn helped her along tenderly with his free arm.

They passed thus through the door at the end of the corridor, out of the

dungeon into the dusky, diverging corridors that ran in a labyrinth here beneath the great citadel. No one was in sight in these passages as they went forward. Thorn's hopes soared.

IF they could get away with Lana to where old Stilicho's ship waited out in the rings, they would soon be racing toward Erebus! And with Lana's secret knowledge to help them—

They were passing a dark cross-corridor at this moment. And Sual Av suddenly whirled around to face it.

"Look out—a trap!" he yelled wildly.

"They've got a damper!" shouted Gunner Welk, leveling his atom-pistol swiftly to fire.

Too late! The Mercurian's atom-pistol only clicked futilely. Thorn pulled trigger, but his weapon too was dead.

A score of Saturnian guards had been lying in wait in that shadowy cross-passage! And one of them held a cylindrical damper pointed toward them—an electrical mechanism that generated a short-range beam of vibratory force which damped or neutralized the electric propulsion-currents of any atom-gun's barrel solenoid, rendering it useless. The damper's beam covered the Planeteer's guns.

The Saturnian soldiers poured out of the cross-passage onto the Planeteers. Thorn clubbed his useless gun and tried to get at Haskell Trask, but went down under a smothering mass of green-faced men. He heard Lana scream as he fought fiercely.

The one-sided fight ended. Thorn was jerked to his feet by four Saturnians who gripped him. Sual Av and Lana were similarly held. Gunner Welk lay unconscious on the floor.

"We shall now find out why these Planeteers came here and who they are working for!" Haskell Trask declared.

"But they dared threaten you, sir!" protested the tall captain. "They deserve instant execution for that crime."

"The indignity to me is nothing," declared the dictator fanatically. "I am thinking only of the great cause we all serve."

"You Planeteers are not as cunning as I thought," Jenk Cheerly told Thorn tauntingly, "or you'd have guessed that there would be a spy-plate outside the entrance to the dungeon."

Thorn's heart sank. So that was how they had been detected—by a hidden spy-plate outside the dungeon entrance, by which a distant officer could keep watch over all who entered or left the prison. The spy-plate watcher had seen them forcing the dictator and the other two ahead of them, and had summoned guards with a damper to nullify the Planeteers' weapons and make sure they had no chance to harm the Leader when they were captured.

Thorn's wild hopes had crashed in utter ruin. He could not face Lana. He felt with bitter self-reproach that he had failed her, and that he had failed the Alliance.

CHAPTER XIV

Under the Psychophones

A METALLIC voice was speaking.

"—distance from the sun to Mercury is thirty-six million miles. To Venus it is s i x t y - s e v e n million miles—"

The psychophone suspended over John Thorn's head droned on in its monotonous metallic voice, speaking his thoughts.

He sat in one of the blue-lit cells, bound by broad leather straps into a chair. Sual Av and Gunner Welk sat nearby, similarly bound. And they too had psychophones attached by thin black wires to tiny incisions in the back of their skulls.

"—distance to Earth is ninety-three million miles. Earth—doomed now, and my fault. They'll never get that radite that would—no, don't think of that! Distance to Mars, a hundred and forty-one million miles! To Jupiter—"

Thorn was desperately trying to

keep his mind upon abstract things and figures. For two days and nights he and his comrades had sat bound here like this. Time had become meaningless, and it seemed to him that he had sat here thus forever, trying to think of anything except what Haskell Trask wanted to know.

Trask had ordered psychophones attached to the captured Planeteers. For Trask knew now that the Planeteers were secret agents of the Alliance, and that they were after the Erebus radite. The dictator had learned that from Lana's psychophone record, which had transcribed the information when Thorn had told it to her through the door of her cell.

"So *that* is why the Planeteers have seemed to blunder into so many of our secrets in these last few years!" Trask had exclaimed. "It wasn't blundering, but deliberate purpose."

"If they were out to get that radite for the Alliance, that must mean that the Alliance has some plan of using the radite against us!" Jenk Cheerly had pointed out shrewdly.

"Why did the Alliance send you to get the radite?" Trask had demanded of the Planeteers.

Thorn and Gunner and Sual Av had remained silent. And the tall, bony dictator had been seized by one of his rages.

"You refuse to tell? Then you shall sit with psychophones attached to you until your thoughts disclose why the Alliance wants that radite!

"See to it, Cheerly," the dictator had ordered the fat spymaster. "And put the girl back under the psychophone again and keep her there until she yields the secret of Erebus."

Thorn had seen Lsna dragged back into her cell, before he and his comrades were placed in another cell. The tiny incisions in their skulls had been rapidly made, and the little electrodes of three psychophones inserted. And they had sat here ever since, the remorseless mechanisms speaking and recording all their conscious thoughts.

John Thorn's mind hovered on the brink of absolute despair. It was Lana he was thinking of. The girl, he knew, could not withstand the awful strain of this diabolical mental inquisition much longer. She would surely soon give way under the strain and let her mind wander to the secret that their captors wanted.

"—if she does, it's the end of everything," the psychophone above spoke Thorn's thoughts. "She mustn't—"

THEN, discovering that he had let his mind stray from abstract things, Thorn fiercely forced his thoughts back to safe subjects. He made himself concentrate on interplanetary history.

"The first space-flight was made by Robert Roth in nineteen-ninety-six. Roth visited Venus and Mars, and in two thousand and one made a second flight to Jupiter and Saturn, but crashed upon his return to Earth and lived only two days. After his death his chief aide, Clymer Nison, visited Uranus, Neptune and Pluto, but Clymer Nison never returned from an attempt he made to visit Erebus—

"Keep your mind off Erebus! If you think of Erebus, you'll think of the radite and the Alliance weapon—keep thinking of interplanetary history! First permanent colonies established on Mars and Venus by two thousand and eighty-five. By twenty-one-fifty all the planets from Mercury to Neptune had been colonized. The first independence movements started in twenty-four-seventy, and by two centuries later, all the colonized planets had become independent worlds."

As Thorn desperately strove to keep his mind concentrated on interplanetary history, his two comrades were using similar stratagems to keep from revealing any information.

He could hear the psychophone attached to Sual Av blaring forth the bald Venusian's thoughts.

"—and then there was that fat girl on Callisto—what the devil was her name?" Sual Av was thinking. "Can't remember her name, but I do remember that she was plenty big. Callisto's gravitation was so weak that she seemed light as a feather, but if I'd held her on my knee on any other world, she'd have flattened me! And

then that tiger-cat of a Martian wench I met when I was engineer at the Syrtis chromium mines. Tried to knife me one night—"

Sual Av was obviously thinking of all the girls he had ever known, to occupy his thoughts safely. But Gunner Welk's psychophone was pouring forth a much different stream of thoughts.

The big Mercurian, ever since their incarceration under the psychophones, had occupied himself in thinking of what he would do to Haskell Trask if the opportunity ever offered.

"—glue his eyelids open and stake him out on the hot side of Mercury to look at the sun a while. No, he'd die too quick that way! It'd he hetter to take his skin off with that acid the Jovian tanners use, and then—"

The cell was like a hedlam to John Thorn's dazed mind. The three psychophones blaring metallically and without pause had become a torment to his ears.

He felt that he could not stand this much longer. And he understood now the full horror of the days that Lana had spent under the relentless instrument. And Lana was again being tortured by the psychophone!

On and on the hours dragged. The blue-lit cell swam ahout Thorn, and he closed his eyes tightly. Yet still the remorseless machine blared his thoughts, repeating interplanetary history, chemical formulae, mathematical tables—anything that would keep his mind on safely abstract suhjects.

Thorn had cudgeled his mind for a means of escape. But there seemed none. He and his comrades were bound into their metal chairs by the hroad leather straps. The door of their cell was secured by one of the invulnerable wave-locks. And two guards—two of Cheerly's Secret Police this time—stood on constant duty out in the dungeon corridor.

Thorn dozed finally. It was his only escape from the torment of the hlaring psychophone. Yet he could sleep for but a hrief period at a time, and he was dully unsurprised when he awakened a little later.

HE went rigid in his honds. He had heen awakened by the entrance of Jenk Cheerly into their cell.

The Uranian spymaster's puffy green face showed suppressed excitement. His little eyes were gleaming triumphantly.

"You Planeteers may as well give up and tell why the Alliance wants the radite, now," he said exultantly.

Thorn made no vocal answer, but his raging thoughts blared from the psychophone.

"If I could just close my hands on that fat throat—just once—"

The psychophones of Sual Av and Gunner were voicing similar thoughts as they gazed with blazing eyes at Cheerly.

The fat Uranian sneered. "It's too bad you lads still feel that way. For the Alliance will never get the radite now, anyway. The League is going to get it. Lana Cain has just given up the secret of Erebus at last!"

"That's a lie!" John Thorn shouted. "A trap to make us talk!"

"It's the truth," Cheerly taunted triumphantly. "Did you think the girl could go on forever without thinking of the secret? The more she tried not to think of it, the more her mind turned toward it. You'll find out the same thing will happen to you."

There was such visible triumph and excitement in the Uranian's fat face that Thorn felt a pang of fear.

At that moment there was a clang of opening doors, and a tramp of feet. Haskell Trask strode into the cell, his hony face and deep eyes ahlaze with excitement.

"You reported that the girl has finally told what she knows about Erebus, Cheerly?" the dictator exclaimed.

"Yes, sir," answered the obese spymaster triumphantly. "Her mental control finally weakened, and she thought of what her father had told her. The psychophone put it all into the record.

"With what she told to guide us, we can land safely on Erebus and get the radite, sir!" the Uranian continued exultantly. "We wouldn't have had a chance without her secret. For it seems that there's only one spot on

Erebus where men can land without meeting a ghastly fate."

Haskell Trask's pale green, bony face twitched with visible emotion. The dictator's gloomy eyes flashed.

"You'll sail at once for Erebus and get the radite!" he ordered Cheerly. "A naval cruiser is waiting in the court now. As soon as you get the radite and start back with it, flash word to me by audio. When I get your message, I'll order our fleets to blast sunward at once for the attack on the Alliance."

His fists clenched. "Then at last our day will have come! Even while our fleets are crushing the Alliance navies, we will be making that radite into bombs that will break the resistance of the inner worlds utterly."

"I'll take the girl and a psychophone with me to Erebus, sir," Cheerly said shrewdly. "She may know a little more about Erebus than her conscious thoughts have revealed. If that is so, I'll get it out of her."

Trask, recalled from his oratorical flight, nodded his head indifferently.

"Take her, then. But make all speed to Erebus and back. Remember, the mightiest armada in the system's history will be waiting for your message as a signal for it to sail sunward!"

JOHN THORN had listened in gathering horror. This was the end of all hope, surely! Cheerly would get the radite and there would be no chance for the Alliance ever to operate Philip Blaine's great secret weapon in the lunar caverns—

"—Philip Blaine's great secret weapon in the lunar caverns," the psychophone attached to Thorn was blaring.

Too late, Thorn suppressed his thoughts! In his momentary horror, he had let his thoughts stray, and the psychophone over his head had been speaking them.

"Did you hear that, sir?" cried Jenk Cheerly to the dictator. "A secret weapon of the Alliance, built by the physicist Philip Blaine in the caverns of Earth's moon! That's why the Alliance wanted the radite—to operate that weapon!"

Haskell Trask's eyes snapped. The dictator strode to where Thorn sat cursing his own loss of mental control that gave the secret away.

"What is the weapon that the Alliance has hidden in the lunar caves?" he demanded of Thorn. "Speak, Earthman!"

Thorn remained rigidly silent. With a violent burst of anger, the dictator struck him across the face.

"We've got to find out what that secret Alliance weapon is!" Trask snapped to his spymaster. "There's just a chance they might be able to operate it without the radite."

"He'll give it away to the psychophone, in time," Cheerly assured his master. "He can't help but give it away—the psychophone pulls out all their secrets, sooner or later."

"You're wrong this time," John Thorn said bitterly. "I don't know the nature of the Alliance weapon. None of us know it—and I'm damned glad now we don't!"

"He's lying, of course," Jenk Cheerly said calmly. "But he'll have to think the truth, sooner or later."

"We'll keep these Planeteers under the psychophones until they do tell what that weapon is," Trask declared harshly. "Meanwhile, don't delay, Cheerly. Get started now for Erebus!"

John Thorn writhed as Lana was brought out of her cell by two of Cheerly's men, and carried down the corridor. He could just glimpse her white, worn face through the grating in the door, and heard her despairing, sobbing cry.

"John, I gave up the secret to them. I couldn't keep from thinking of it longer! And now they're taking me with them to Erebus. Everything is lost, and it's all my fault!"

"Lana, it's not your fault!" Thorn cried hoarsely. "Lana—"

But she was gone. For a moment, Jenk Cheerly's fat, green face grinned in at them through the grating. His eyes were sinister and hateful.

"Goodbye, Planeteers," the Uranian squeaked mockingly. "Wish me a pleasant voyage to Erebus—for by the time I get back with the radite, you three will be dead!"

CHAPTER XV

Through the Tempest

STORM raged over nighted Saturnopolis. Dazzling sheets of weird crimson lightning seared across the sky, and thunder bawled hoarsely like a hubbub of giants. Torrents of rain and of big hailstones battered the dark metropolis. This was one of the periodic "satellite storms" which occur whenever three or more of the ringed planet's moons are in conjunction, exerting their combined gravitational pull to set up tidal disturbances in the deep atmosphere.

Tbe great citadel of the dictator loomed vague and black in the tempest, its windows shining with blue light. Even night and storm could not lessen the intense activity that was going on in this nerve-center of the League of Cold Worlds, as Haskell Trask and his lieutenants drew up their final plans for the greatest conquest in history.

Deep down in the dungeon below the citadel, the roar of the raging storm was muted to a deep, continuous rumbling. And down here in the blue-lit cell, John Thorn was working feverishly.

He was hitching his chair across the floor, an inch at a time, by throwing his body forward in his leather bonds. Slowly, he was edging toward the chairs of his two sleeping comrades.

"—got to make it tonight or never!" Thorn's psychophone was droning. "They'll read my plan from the record when they next take and examine it. We've got to make it before then—"

Thorn'a face was baggard, his eyes burning with a febrile light. His brain had conceived a desperate hope of escape.

Days and nights bad passed since Jenk Cheerly had sailed for Erebus, with Lana Cain his prisoner. How many days and nights, Thorn could not estimate exactly. Time had become a blur to him as he and his comrades sat bound here beneath the psychophones.

Thorn had felt his mind cracking from strain as the hours and days dragged. He had almost felt that if he had known what Trask wanted to know, the nature of the Alliance's secret weapon, he would have told it. He had heen glad then they did *not* know it.

Most agonizing of all in those hlurred hours had been the thought of Cheerly, on his way to far Erebus with Lana. The Uranian would come back with the radite. But he would not bring Lana back, once all her possible usefulness was ended!

Tonight, an hour before, Trask's men had removed from the Planeteers' psychophones the spools of tape which contained the record of their thoughts for the last day and night. New spools had been inserted and the men had left. It had been then that Thorn's feverish mind bad suddenly conceived his crazy plan of escape.

Aa he thought of the plan, the psychophone had spoken it and the recorder had transcribed it. And so Thorn knew that he must put the plan into effect before the record was examined again, or his plan would be read from the record and forestalled.

Thorn, convulsively rocking his chair forward, prayed inwardly that the rumble of the atorm would keep the two guards out in the corridor from hearing. He inched on, his chair moving slowly, the thin black wires that connected bis skull to the psychophone above, slowly lengthening out. Finally Thorn had got his chair close to those in wbich Gunner Welk and Sual Av were sleeping exhaustedly.

"Gunner!" Thorn whispered fiercely. "Wake up!"

THE big Mercurian slowly opened bleared, red-rimmed eyes. Sual Av also awoke, yawning. Their psychophones started droning their awakening thoughts.

"Gunner, I want you to tip your chair over to hring your head down on my chair," Thorn whispered. "Then maybe you can chew through one of these leather straps that bind my arms."

"What good would that do?" said Gunner with dull hopelessness. "Even

if we all three got free of our honds, we couldn't get out of this cell—not with the door holted by a wave-lock."

"I've an idea that might get us out!" Thorn said feverishly. "It's a chance—our only one!"

"Try it, Gunner!" urged Sual Av, wide awake now.

With no hope in his face, Gunner Welk obeyed. He rocked back and forth in his chair until it tipped forward, his head coming down against Thorn's lap. Hitching painfully sidewise, the big Mercurian got his teeth into one of Thorn's leather arm-straps.

They heard his jaws working as he hit into the tough Jovian leather. Their psychophones continued to drone on, uttering their varying thoughts. But the rumble of the raging storm above was loud enough to keep the guards in the corridor from hearing.

Thorn felt the strap Gunner was chewing weaken. He tensed his arm in a fierce effort. The strap broke!

Quickly, Thorn unbuckled the other straps that held him. He tipped Gunner's chair hack to normal position. Then he reached around and with numbed fingers found the tiny, needle-like electrode at the hack of his skull, and gently pulled it out. He felt his scalp close over the minute incision. His psychophone went silent.

Thorn got to his feet. He staggered, his numbed limbs buckling under him at first. Then he steadied, and unbuckled the straps that held Sual Av and the Mercurian to their chairs.

"Don't disconnect your psychophones yet!" he warned them. "If the guards outside happened to notice that all our psychophones were dead, they'd suspect something at once."

"Now what?" Sual Av whispered. "How can we get out of this cell without a wave-key to operate the lock?"

"Yes, what's your idea?" Gunner asked hoarsely.

"It came to me as I watched them changing spools in the psychophones tonight," Thorn muttered. "I shut my mind off it till after they'd gone, so they wouldn't hear."

He was taking down from its mounting the psychophone that for so many days had blared his thoughts. With quivering fingers, he began dissembling the intricate little machine. Tubes and coils and condensers came from it, as he rapidly took it apart.

"There are enough parts here," he muttered feverishly. "If I can just remember enough of my tech-school training."

Thorn began putting certain parts of the mechanism back together again, in a totally different hook-up. The tiny atomic generator that furnished power, the transformers and rectifiers—and then he worked long upon rewiring an "alternator," connecting it electrically to a master modulator tube.

An hour passed—and another. The huhbub of storm was even louder from above. The droning of the other two Planeteers' psychophones was almost inaudible through the roar.

Thorn finally straightened, holding the compact rebuilt mechanism in

[*Turn page*]

trembling bands. His face was dripping.

"Now for it!" he whispered shakily to the other two Planeteers. He advanced with the little machine to the locked door.

"You've rebuilt the psychophone parts into a wave-projector?" Sual Av whispered, staring. "To use as a wave-key?"

"It won't work," Gunner muttered. "It may project waves, but you don't know the secret frequency that will operste this lock. It might be any one of countless possible frequencies."

BUT Thorn only nodded.

"I thought of that!" he said hoarsely. "I built an automatic modulator into the thing. It will start projecting waves of frequency down in the sixteenth octave, and run up to the forty-fifth, by steps of twenty vibrations each. You know all wave-locks are keyed in those octaves, for above them you get heat radiations."

"It might work," Sual Av agreed. "Most locks have an error-margin of ten vibrations per second, so your automatic step-ups ought to overlsp all frequencies in those octaves."

Thorn was already at the door. He held the end of his little mskeshift projector against the inertrum door just inside the wave-lock. He was counting on the high power of his vibrations to penetrate the inertrum from inside, and reach the lock.

The little projector hummed as he touched its switch. Invisible waves were shooting from it into the lock, changing frequency by 20-vibration jumps each fraction of a second.

In a moment came a *click* from the wave-lock! The bolt had drawn back, ss the right frequency released the lock.

"By heaven, it worked!" Gunner Welk exclaimed hoarsely, his eyes lighting with wild hope now.

Thorn peered tautly out through the door-grating. The two SP guards on duty were standing a few yards down the corridor, evidently discussing the storm that roared above.

Gunner and Sual Av now removed the needlelike electrodes of the psychophones from the tiny incisions at the back of their skulls. They staggered stiffly from the chairs to Thorn's side, as he gently opened the unlocked door.

One of the SP men, seeing the cell door open from the corner of his eye, yelled and reached for his atom-pistol.

"Get them!" Thorn shouted hoarsely, lunging out.

The charging Planeteers reached the two Saturnians before they could level the weapons they had drawn. Thorn grabbed the atom-pistol of one of the green men, and twisted fiercely.

The Saturnian suddenly let go of the gun and jumped back, clawing a pocket-audio from his jacket. He shouted wildly into the little instrument.

"Dungeon-guards calling for help! The prisoners are—"

Thorn brought the atom-pistol down on the man's head, and he sank with a groan. Gunner and Sual Av had already knocked out the other guard, and the Mercurian had his gun.

"That call will bring guards down here at once!" Thorn cried. "Quick—the drain by which we got in here! It's our one chance now to get to the space-ship court!"

They ran down the short dungeon corridor to the place where the drain opened. The inertrum bars had been reset in new cement to repair the drain-grating, Thorn saw instantly.

He leveled his gun and triggered rapidly. The bursting flares of blinding energy burned away the new cement, again freeing the inertrum bars. As Gunner Welk bent and tore loose the bars, Thorn heard over the roar of the storm a rush of running feet.

"They're coming!" he cried, and leaped headfirst down into the narrow tube. The others followed him.

Thorn writhed down the cramped pipe with frantic haste, ahead of the Mercurian and Venusian. He heard distant yells as soldiers burst into the dungeon which they had just quitted.

IN a moment Thorn emerged headfirst into the place where the five citadel drains converged into one big

tube. Water was rushing down here, flowing down through three of the pipes that drained courts open to the raging storm.

"This is the drain that leads up to the space-ship court!" he cried, scrambling into the right-hand pipe.

As he crawled at the head of his comrades up this different pipe, icy floods of water from above smashed unceasingly into his face. The drain was almost full of downrushing water. Blinded, gasping, he fought upward through the tube until he glimpsed the grating above, outlined against terrific red lightning flares.

Thorn drew his gun and fired up at the grating through the rushing water. The whizzing flare of bursting atom-shells above was almost drowned by another appalling burst of scarlet lightning, accompanied by a tremendous shock of thunder.

He pushed on upward through the streaming water. His hands found the bars of this grating, loose where their ends had been exposed by burning away of the cement. With a convulsive effort, Thorn pushed the bars upward and scrambled up into the court.

The full fury of the tremendous Saturnian storm beat upon him in this open court. Rattling showers of big hailstones crackled like musketry, torrents of icy rain smashing down upon him from the black sky. Gunner and Sual Av were scrambling up out of the drain to his side.

Blinding red lightning arced across the heavens in awful, burning splendor, and showed Thorn two small space-cruisers parked near the center of the court. It also showed him that a troop of guards was running hastily out from the other side of the court.

"They've guessed we'd make for these ships. Come on before they cut us off!" he yelled hoarsely to his comrades.

They plunged forward. The crimson lightning died, and in the succeeding thick blackness, the whole citadel rocked wildly about them to the deafening shock of thunder.

The Planeteers collided with a wet metal wall in the darkness. The side of one of the ships! Then another fizzing flare of fiery lightning showed Thorn the ship door, a few feet away.

He pushed the unsealed door inward, and fell rather than jumped inside. As the other two Planeteers leaped in after him, through the bellowing thunder came a shout of voices.

Atom-shells flicked into the inertrum wall of the ship and exploded in bright little bomb-bursts of light. The guards running across the court toward them were shooting.

"Seal the door, Gunner!" Thorn yelled wildly. "I'll take her up!"

He pitched forward in darkness toward the control-room, Sual Av at his heels. He heard the door grinding shut as he pawed frantically for the controls, standardized in all ships.

More atom-shells flared outside. By their glare, Thorn found the injector-lever and pulled it frantically. The power-chamber of the little ship burst into a roar.

The panel-lights sprang on as Sual Av found the switch, Thorn leaping to the firing-keys. His fingers flashed down.

With a nerve-shattering roar of all keel tubes blasting, the little cruiser shot almost vertically upward, rising on spuming fire-jets out of the big court at the heart of the citadel.

Thorn cut in all stern tubes, and the little ship screamed up on a steep slant through the raging storm. Rocked by buffeting bursts of thunder, lit by the dancing flares of red lightning, it roared up across storm-swept Saturnopolis with dizzying speed.

Sual Av had the oxygenators throbbing by now. Gunner Welk came staggering into the control-room, fighting the terrific acceleration pressure. Up through the storm they climbed till they were above the tempest, the roar of air outside now fading away.

SUAL AV uttered an exultant cry as they burst out of mists into open space, with the colossal, gleaming arc of the rings spanning the star-thick black firmament ahead.

"Clear space again!" he cried.

"They'll call an alarm to all their bases on the outer moons!" Thorn exclaimed. "If Stilicho isn't waiting at the rendezvous—"

Everything depended now, all three knew, on reaching the rendezvous in the rings where old Stilicho Keene had agreed to wait with the *Venture*, in Cassini's division at the west limb of the planet-shadow.

The colossal yellow bulk of Saturn was behind them, the mighty bow of the rings now close ahead. Thorn was heading toward the segment of the rings obscured hy the shadow of the planet. Their little ship raced above the innermost, thinnest ring, roaring at top speed low over the vast circular swarm of whirling planetoids.

Soon ahead yawned Cassini's division, the gap of clear space between the two great outermost rings. As Thorn sent their craft flying down into the gap at the point where the west limb of the planet-shadow lay across it, he flipped the audio-switch.

"Stilicho, the Planeteers calling!" he spoke into the instrument. "We're being chased. Where are you?"

In a moment, there came a shrill, excited reply.

"Coming, boy! We've got you in our aura. Stand by and get your suits on, and we'll take you aboard!"

A few moments later the long, grim-lined *Venture* drove up from the gap hetween rings, and hovered beside the Planeteers' little ship. The air-lock of the pirate craft was open.

Then a brief interval saw the Planeteers inside that air-lock, tearing off the space-suits they had worn as they jumped tha gap between ships. And the *Venture* was roaring on through spaca with all the power of its great tuhes, away from Saturn.

"I thought you boys were dead sure!" Stilicho Keene was babbling wildly to the Planeteers. "It's been days we've waited here. But where'a Lana? You didn't leave the lass behind?"

The old pirate's wrinkled red face and rheumy eyes were tense as his cracked voice shrilled the question. And Ool, the space-dog, looked up at Thorn with pleading eyes.

"Cheerly has Lana," Thorn said hoarsely. "He sailed in a navel cruiser for Erebus, days ago. He has Lana's secret now, but he took her along in case she knew more than she'd told."

"Erebus?" Old Stilicho's wrinkled face became ghastly. "God in heaven, if he's taken the lass there—"

"We've got to follow them, Stilicho!" Thorn cried. "For if Cheerly gets what he wants on Erehus, he'll come back, but he'll never bring Lana back."

The old man's faded eyes blazed. "We'll follow to Erebus, yes! I'd follow the lass to hell itself!"

They climbed hastily to the control-room, where Stilicho seized the controls from the Jovian pilot on duty there.

"Calling Titan and Iapetus bases!" a Saturnian voice was yelling from the audio-speaker excitedly. "All cruisers out in net-patrol! The Planeteers are loose and hreaking for space!"

"They can't catch us now!" Gunner cried fiercely.

The *Venture* was already roaring out to the orbit of Titan. Stilicho had changed course, and the huge, ringed hulk of Saturn and the small, bright sun lay dead astern. They were heading out toward the farthest limit of the system, toward the Solar System's last home of mystery.

Black reaction and apprehension were cold in John Thorn's heart as he looked haggardly ahead. Could they hope to overtake Cheerly's ship when it had such a start? And if they did not, and so did not have Lana's secret knowledge to guide them, what would be their fate when they reached mysterious Erebus?

CHAPTER XVI

Forbidden World

THE frontier of the Solar System! A vast and gloomy darkness, a region of eternal night remote by six billion trackless miles from the far, bright star of the sun. A cold and

awful immensity of space beyond which stretches only the shoreless sea of the interstellar void.

Yet even out into these far, dark spaces reached the invisible grip of the sun, to hold the outermost of its planetary children. Out here in eternal silence and darkness, far from the flaming orb that gave it birth, solemnly moved the dim world of Erebus on its slow, stupendous patrol.

A ship was moving out through the colossal dark toward the last planet. It was moving at tremendous speed under inertia, yet it seemed merely to be crawling through the vast emptiness as it held its course toward the dim, slowly largening sphere of Erebus.

John Thorn peered fixedly from the window of the control-room at the mysterious world ahead. It was like a little ghost-world, shining in the dark vault with a feeble blue light.

"It must have an extraordinarily high alhedo to reflect so much sunlight at this distance," Thorn muttered.

"Yes, it's cursed queer," Sual Av agreed, frowning intently.

Beside the Planeteers, who had discarded their Saturnian disguises, old Stilicho Keene peered forward, a haunting apprehension in his faded eyes. The space-dog crouched at his feet.

Gunner Welk was at the eyepiece of the 'scope, staring toward dim Erebus. The towering Mercurian turned to Thorn.

"Cheerly's ship isn't in sight, John," he rumbled. "He must already have landed on Erehus."

Thorn's hrown face contorted in agonized emotion.

"We should have overtaken him!" he cried, his voice raw and self-accusing. "If we'd put on a little more speed—"

"But hoy, the *Venture's* heen at top speed in all the long days since we left Saturn!" Stiljcho quavered. "It's been like a nightmare voyage, with the power-chambers throhhing to the limit, and my crew getting more scared each day, and us sailin' on toward God knows what on that world ahead!"

It had, indeed, seemed like a strange dream to all of them as their craft had for days crept out into the trackless, forbidding immensities. Stilicho's pirate crew had whispered fearfully, only the hope of rescuing their idolized girl leader keeping them from mutinying. An alien chill gripped all except John Thorn.

Thorn had become more and more feverishly anxious each day, as he thought of Jenk Cheerly speeding on with Lana to seize the precious radite, the radite whoae taking would signal Lana's death and the launching of Trask's attack on the Alliance!

"Shall I try the spectro-telescope?" Gunner was asking. "We're near enough to Erehus for it to detect the radite."

Thorn nodded quickly. "The radite ahould show up clearly. I'll check our aura again for Cheerly's ship."

Thorn snapped on the aura. But something was wrong. The aura-chart did not come on—the device was dead.

"What the devil?" Sual Av muttered astonishedly. "Something must he jamming the ether to kill our aura like that."

"All our other instruments are desd, too!" hurst out Stilicho, looking up worriedly from the panel. "The gravitometers and space-sextants and even the audio!"

"Is it some trick of Cheerly's?" Sual Av cried.

"It couldn't he—he wouldn't have power enough to jam the ether like this," Thorn declared.

GUNNER WELK swung around from his instrument, his massive face puzzled.

"John, there's something wrong with this spectro-telescope, too," he said. "I adjusted its limits to the field of radioactive elements, but all of Erehus still shows up in it."

Old Stilicho looked anxiously from the faintly shining hlue ghost-world ahead, to the puzzled Planeteers.

"We'll soon be close to Erehus," the old pirate said. "What are we going to do? Land and hunt for Lana on foot?"

There was lurking terror in his faded eyes as he made the proposition, yet he kept his shrill voice steady.

"We dare not just sail in and land," Thorn muttered. "It might mean the end of us, right there."

His face worked. "Yet we daren't lose time either! If Lana had only heen able to tell us the secret."

"John, remember what Cheerly told Trask in our cell on Saturn, after he'd got the secret from Lana!" Sual Av said eagerly. "That he'd learned from Lana that there was only one spot on Erebus where men could land without meeting a ghastly fate!"

"One spot, but where is it?" Gunner demanded. "There's no use of our hunting for that spot, for we wouldn't know it if we saw it."

"Yes, we would know it!" Thorn cried suddenly. "Cheerly's ship would have landed in that one safe spot. If we can find where Cheerly has landed here, we can land safely beside him!"

He swung around to Stilicho Keene. "We'll reduce speed and circle around Erebus looking for Cheerly's ship. Don't go lower than a hundred miles above the surface."

Unutterable tension gripped the Planeteers and the old pirate as the *Ven*ture swept in closer toward the mysterious planet from which only one man in all history had returned. Erebus slowly expanded ahead, a small world hardly larger than Mercury. At last the ship dropped to within a hundred miles of its surface.

It was a strangely luminous planetscape they looked down upon, a world shimmering everywhere with the dusky hlue radiance they had noticed from afar. They had thought that faint luminescence a trick of reflected sunlight, hut they saw now that it was somehow inherent in this world. Through that dusky hlue haze they looked down upon a weirdly forbidding landscape.

Low, jagged, barren mountains rose like fangs bared at the dark, star-studded sky. Beyond their rocky slopes stretched dim deserts, wide hlank wastes upon which moved little whirls of dust. And all this dreary landscape of eternal twilight was wrapped in the uncanny faint blue radiance.

"It's queer, the way it all shines," muttered Sual Av. "But I can't see anything dangerous down there."

"There's something dangerous there—terribly so," Thorn said tautly. "If there weren't, this world wouldn't have swallowed up so many hundreds of explorers in the last nine centuries!"

"There's air of some kind down there, anyway," old Stilicho quavered. "See them there whirling dust-devils?"

"But there can't he an atmosphere here!" Gunner declared. "That would mean that Erebus is comparatively warm—and what would keep it warm at this distance from the sun?"

"Everything about this world is *wrong*, somehow," Thorn muttered. "The way it shines, its warmth and atmosphere, the way our instruments went dead when we neared it."

THE *Venture* was now moving on an even keel a hundred miles above the surface of the ghostly hlue planet. Stilicho handled the controls as they moved at reduced speed around the equator of the mystery world. Gunner Welk swept the terrain heneath with the 'scope as they sped along.

The cruel, barren mountains swept hack and disappeared in the glowing blue haze hehind them. They moved on ahove the endless wastes of faintly shining desert.

"Thought I saw something shiny moving down there," Gunner exclaimed in a moment. "My eyes must be playing me tricks."

"Cheerly's ship is what we want to find," Thorn rapped. "It's somewhere here. He hasn't had time to lift the radite and leave, considering how fast we followed him."

Within a few hours, they had completely circumnavigated the equator of the little mystery world. They had seen nothing but the deathly deserts and mountains, wrapped in the unchanging, shimmering hlue haze.

"Run north and circle the planet again midway between the equator and the pole," Thorn ordered Stilicho.

"It's kind of like lookin' for a needle in a haystack, hunting one ship on a whole world," Stilicho muttered.

"This world isn't big—we'll sweep every mile of it if necessary," John Thorn declared.

Soon they were again circling Erebus, midway between the equator and the northern pole. Before they had gone far, Gunner pointed to a black speck on the northern desert horizon.

"Something odd about that black mountain yonder!" he reported from the 'scope eyepiece. "It has none of the shining haze over it—the only place I've seen here that hasn't."

"Steer toward it, but keep high," John Thorn told the old pirate. "We'll take a look."

The black speck on the horizon expanded rapidly as the ship rocketed north. It grew into a big black mountain that loomed in solitary majesty out of a wide expanse of the haze-wrapped desert, brooding beneath the star-flecked dark sky.

It was a mountain almost perfectly dome-shaped, the regularity of its outline startling. It was two miles across at the base, and a mile in height. It stood out bold and black because none of the shining blue haze hovered over it.

"Queer, the symmetrical shape of that mountain," Sual Av muttered. "Is it possible that it is—"

"There's a ship parked on that mountain!" Gunner Welk yelled suddenly in high excitement.

Thorn leaped to the 'scope eyepiece. The huge, frowning black mass of the domed mountain jumped into close view. Upon the curved, rough eastern side of the great mass, near the top, rested a long, torpedo-like metal shape.

"It's Cheerly's cruiser!" Thorn exclaimed. "If they landed on that black mountain, it must be the one spot on Erebus where it's safe to land. We're going to land there and seize his ship!"

He swung, his pulses hammering. "Veer off, Stilicho, and run back toward the mountain from the west at a mile altitude! Cheerly can't have seen us yet. We'll land on the west side of the mountain and take him by surprise!"

The old pirate swung the *Venture* in a wide detour, and soon they were rocketing low toward the mountain from the west, hidden by the domed mass from the ship parked on the other side. Expertly, the old Martian brought the ship down to a landing on the rough, curved western side of the great mass.

AS the blasting roar of the rockets died, Sual Av turned from the instrument he had been manipulating.

"The atmosphere checks as air, but loaded with elements I can't identify it without analysis," he reported.

"We'll play safe and wear our space-suits," Thorn declared. "Come on!"

They hastened down into the mid-compartment of the ship. Stilicho's motley pirate crew were waiting there, all of them looking a little scared by the fact that they had actually landed upon the surface of Erebus.

"We're going over the top of this mountain and capture Cheerly's ship," Thorn rapped to them. "On suits, everybody! And bring all the dampers we have. There's to be no using of atom-guns unless absolutely necessary, for we don't want to hurt Lana."

Five minutes later, the big door port of the *Venture* ground open. Out through the air-lock moved the company of forty men, all in suits and helmets, with John Thorn in the lead.

Thorn noted that they stepped out onto a rough, jagged surface of black *metal*. The whole mountain, it seemed, was of black metal, pocked here and there with deposits of glistening ores. The top of the dome-shaped mass loomed starkly against the dusky, starry sky.

Thorn could not repress a tautening of his nerves. This was Erebus, the forbidden world that had claimed so many explorers' lives since nine centuries ago. From the curving side of the mountain on which the *Venture* lay, he could look out westward across the barren deserts, wrapped in mysterious, shimmering blue radiance.

The little party was armed with several of the cylindrical dampers that

could put atom-guns out of commission, and with atom-pistols helted outside their space-suits. They started up the side of the metal mountain, trudging against a gravitation that was surprisingly strong for so small a world. The Planeteers and old Stilicho led, and heside them ran the space-dog, Ool, his green eyes blazing as though he sensed they were on the same world as Lana Cain.

They reached the top of the domed mountain, and Thorn crouched down with his comrades to reconnoiter. Cheerly's ship, a long, many-gunned Saturnian naval cruiser with the name *Gargol* on Its bows, lay only a few hundred yards down the curved rough metal slope. They could see a few men in space-suits outside the ship, digging glistening ores from the deposits that packed the metal mountain.

Sual Av's voice reached Thorn by conduction, as the Planeteers crouched with the old pirate and the space-dog.

"They're digging fuel-ores for the return trip," the Venusian muttered. "They can't have sighted our ship."

Thorn nodded his glassite helmet tensely. "Here we go," he said, rising to his feet and signaling the pirates behind them. "Whatever you do, be careful you don't injure Lana!"

The space-suited attackers swept down the rough curve of the mountain in a silent run toward the Saturnian ship. They were half-way to it before one of the diggers there glimpsed them.

Instantly, the man fired his atom-pistol at them. The little shell struck a man behind Thorn, a pirate who fell as the blinding flare of energy enveloped him. Thorn swung the damper he carried toward the Saturnian who had fired, and killed his weapon.

"Quick, men!" Thorn yelled, then remembered that their audios were off, and signaled with his arm.

The little pirate band swept fiercely down the metal slope. Out of the ship, Saturnians in space-suits were pouring and leveling atom-pistols. The dampers carried by Thorn and several of his men deadened many of the weapons, but atom-shells from others flared blindingly among the pirates and felled a half-dozen men.

THEN Thorn and his followers reached the Saturnians. It became a fierce fight at close quarters, shells of atom-pistols flaring and men falling, under the solemn stars of the dark sky. The space-dog leaped and tore horribly with his great teeth and talons among the enemy. Thorn swung his heavy cylindrical damper as a great club as he and Gunner and Sual Av fought forward.

The Saturnians, appalled by the fierceness of the pirate attack, scrambled back through the air-lock of the ship.

"After them!" Thorn cried, waving his arm in a fierce forward gesture. "Don't let them get away with the ship!"

Gunner flung the damper he carried, and it jammed the air-lock door. Then Thorn's men were pushing into the ship.

In ten minutes, the fight inside the ship was ended. Taken by surprise, unprepared for an attack, the Saturnian crew had not heen able to withstand the rush of Thorn's followers.

A dozen of the Saturnians lying dead, the survivors stood with hands raised in surrender. As soon as the air-lock door was closed and the oxy-generators functioning, Thorn ripped off his helmet and ordered the massed prisoners to take off their helmets also.

As each sullen green Saturnian face emerged to view, Thorn's pulse pounded. But when all the prisoners were unhelmeted, he felt a shock of bitter disappointment. Neither Jenk Cheerly nor Lana were in the ship!

"Where's Cheerly and the girl?" he demanded fiercely of the crestfallen Saturnian cruiser captain.

"Cheerly left here yesterday, taking two men and the pirate girl," answered the captain sullenly. "They went toward those mountains westward."

"Cheerly had located the radite there?" Sual Av cried eagerly. The Saturnian nodded sulkily.

"Yes, after we landed our ship here, Cheerly worked with our spectroscopes until he ascertained that the deposit of radite lay somewhere in those mountains. He took the girl with him because he believed she knows exactly where it is, though she said she didn't."

"Then all we have to do is to wait till Cheerly comes back here with the radite, and grab him!" Gunner exclaimed.

"No, we can't do that!" Thorn cried. "Cheerly would bring back the radite —but he wouldn't bring back Lana! We've got to go after him!"

"In our ship?" old Stilicho asked eagerly.

Thorn shook his head. "We daren't. This is the one safe place on Erebus where a ship can land, remember. We'll have to follow on foot, in our space-suits."

He saw a quick gleam of satisfaction in the sullen eyes of the Saturnian captain. And Thorn's face tightened.

"*You* will come along with us," he told the green-faced captain suspiciously.

The Saturnian went livid. "I won't go!" he gasped, all his secret satisfaction gone at once. "I won't!"

Thorn seized him by the throat. "Why not?" he barked. "What are you afraid of? What is it that made you glad at the idea of us going on foot to those mountains?"

The Saturnian was silent, helpless rage and fear contending in his face.

"Tell, or I'll make you walk out there by yourself!" Thorn menaced. The threat crumpled the captain's spirit.

"I'll tell!" he gasped. "It means a hideous doom if you venture off this mountain without protection. For all the matter of those deserts and mountains out there, all the matter of Erebus except this single metal mountain, is radioactive matter.

"Erebus is a radioactive world! That's the secret the pirate girl knew, that no one else guessed. A ship that landed anywhere except on this mountain would instantly itself become radioactive by induced radioactivity from the soil on which it landed. The same fate would befall an unprotected man who stepped off this mountain. This metal mountain is the only non-radioactive matter on the whole planet!"

CHAPTER XVII

In the Shining Wastes

A RADIOACTIVE world! A world, every atom of which was throbbing with natural or induced radioactivity, constantly emitting streams of deadly radiation, changing slowly and spontaneously through the long ages into different elements farther down the atomic scale! *This*, then, was the secret of Erebus!

The thing was so stupefying that the Planeteers and old Stilicho and his pirates were silent, stunned. Every man there looked wildly at his neighbor, bewildered by the incredible assertion the Saturnian captain made.

"It's impossible!" John Thorn burst, finally. His eyes were almost dazed in expression. "A whole world of radioactive matter—it can't be true!"

"It is true!" cried the Saturnian captain fearfully. "The girl knew it all the time. Her father, that old space pirate, Martin Cain, discovered it when he came here a generation ago. If he hadn't landed on this mountain, he'd have met the same doom as everyone else who has come here—his ship and his body riddled by the terrific radiation the moment he landed."

"But why in the devil's name should this metal mountain alone on the whole planet remain non-radioactive?" cried Gunner Welk, his massive face incredulous. "It doesn't make sense."

"I think I understand that," Sual Av said keenly, his green eyes gleaming. "I took a good look at the black metal of this mountain as we climbed up over it. It's a solid mass of asterium."

"Asterium?" Thorn echoed. "That queer element they've found in meteors from outer space?"

Sual Av's bald head bobbed eagerly. "Yes, the element whose discovery forced them to revise the periodic table—the most inert element ever discovered. It's completely resistant to radioactive action, they found."

"But asterium was supposed to be an element foreign to our solar system, one formed somehow in far-off giant stars!" cried Gunner. "How the devil would there happen to be a solid mountain of the stuff here on Erebus?"

"This mountain of asterium was not always native to Erebus, if my guess is right," retorted the Venusian. "This mountain came here from outer space. It's a gigantic meteorite of almost solid asterium that fell here on Erebus in some past age."

"By heaven, I believe Sual's right!" Gunner exclaimed excitedly. "That would explain the peculiar domed shape of the mountain. It's roughly spherical, but half of it is buried."

Old Stilicho Keene had listened, only half-understanding. Now he ventured an anxious question to Thorn.

"If it's doom to step off this mountain, as that there Saturnian says, then how could Cheerly and his men and Lana dare to leave here on foot to search for the radite?"

"If my guess is right, they had some sort of protection against the radioactive emanations out there," Thorn clipped. He turned to the Saturnian officer. "What about it?"

The green-faced captain nodded nervously. "You've guessed it. We were here two days, before Cheerly figured out a way to protect them when they left the mountain. He figured that since the asterium of this mountain is proof against the radioactive emanations out there, he would melt some of the asterium and coat their space-suits with it to make them ray-proof. That's what he did, and it worked all right."

THE first Planeteer looked grim.

"It'll work for us, too, then!" John Thorn declared. "We'll proof three space-suits for ourselves at once, and go after Cheerly and Lana. We've got to overtake them before they find that radite—for Cheerly will do away with Lana as soon as he has the stuff!"

"But, boy, can't I go with you Planeteers?" old Stilicho pleaded.

"You're needed to stay here and see that these prisoners don't break loose," Thorn told him. "Take some men back over to the *Venture* now, and bring it over and park it beside this cruiser. We've got to work rapidly to overtake Cheerly."

Soon the *Venture* had been brought over the mountain, and settled down beside the *Gargol*, the Saturnian cruiser. The prisoners were locked in a compartment of their own ship, and a guard set over them.

"You needn't be afraid of us following you out there," the Saturnian captain told Thorn, with a shiver. "There's none of us would dream of going out in those deadly deserts, among God knows what kind of shining demons that roam there."

"Shining demons?" Sual Av asked the green man. "What are you talking about?"

"We've seen them, from atop the mountain here," the Saturnian answered with a shudder. "Glowing, unearthly creatures of some kind far out on the blue haze. I don't know what they are."

"You must have seen some dust-whirls, that's all," Thorn clipped. "Come on, Sual!"

The Planeteers set to work with urgent haste, helped by a party of Stilicho's men. They found the atomic furnace which Jenk Cheerly had set up to melt some asterium was still in place. They had it going in a few minutes.

Wearing their space-suits constantly, the Planeteers and their helpers soon melted down a mass of the solid asterium into liquid state. Then three of their flexible metal space-suits were dipped into the molten black asterium.

The glassite helmets, immune to all heat and cold, were also coated with the black element. Before it hardened on the helmets, Thorn scraped two spots thin, making them semi-transparent for vision.

"It means dim vision, but I dare not remove it completely from the eye plates of the helmets," he muttered. "Anything more would be dangerous, in the hell of radiation that must rage out there."

The asterium coating on the suits and helmets hardened rapidly. When it was cool, they took the ray-proofed suits into the *Venture*, and put them on in place of the ones they wore.

"Hell, it's as stiff as a suit of armor," muttered Gunner Welk, as he moved in his new suit.

"And these eyeholes can acarcely be seen through," complained Sual Av as he donned the helmet.

"Will you two stop chattering and hurry?" John Thorn demanded violently.

His two comrades stared at him. And Thorn realized that he had shouted at them.

"Sorry," he said hoarsely, "but I'm half-out of my head, thinking of Lana out there with Cheerly."

"We understand," Sual Av nodded. "But we'll find them, sure, before anything happens to Lana. And we're sure of the radite now, if all goes well."

"It isn't only getting the radite that's on my mind," Gunner said. His face was deeply troubled, as he added slowly, "Even if we get the radite back safely to Earth to use in Philip Blaine's secret weapon, how do we know that weapon will really save the Alliance from the League attack? What kind of weapon can hope to defeat ten thousand armed cruisers?"

JOHN THORN felt a chill of foreboding at the big Mercurian's words. Thorn, too, all this time, had been haunted by the very possibility that Gunner had put into words.

"Suppose Blaine's invention fails, after all?" Gunner continued. "Suppose it's sound in theory, but impractical in fact. We don't know a thing about the nature of it, remember!"

"I've thought of that, too," Sual Av muttered worriedly. "Blaine has the name of one of the greatest physicists in the system—yet what *could* he invent that would sweep ten thousand cruisers out of space?"

"Blaine must have something tremendous," Thorn insisted desperately. "The Chairman has faith in his weapon. We've got to have faith, too, and get the radite that will operate the thing. And we won't get it by delaying here!"

The Planeteers emerged from the *Venture*, wearing the black, asterium-coated suits and helmets. Stilicho Keene came hastily toward them, holding to the collar of the space-dog Ool. The beast reared up against Thorn, its green eyes pleading.

"Ool senses Lana somewhere on thia world," Stilicho said. "Are you going to take him with you?"

"We can't. His unprotected body, non-organic though it is, would be affected by the radiation out there," Thorn said. He grasped the space-suited old Martian's hand. "Keep a close watch over the prisoners, Stilicho. We'll come back with Lana and the radite—or we won't come back at all."

"Good luck to ye," Stilicho said.

The Planeteers started down the western curved slope of the huge black meteorite-mountain. Soon they reached the base of the mountain, and stood for a moment, looking out awedly across the uncanny world into which they were to venture.

Under the dark, starry sky stretched the forbidding deserts of Erebus, dim wastes whose every grain of sand throbbed with a faint blue radiance that gathered in drifting azure haze. The shining blue mists swirled and pulsated slowly, wrapping the whole dusky landscape before them, veiling the mountains westward.

They knew that when they stepped out on that glowing waste, into those shining mists, they would be stepping into a hell of radiation streaming ceaselessly from the radioactive mass of the planet—a torrent of alpha particles and of beta rays and of hard gamma radiation as withering as super X-rays.

Determinedly, John Thorn strode forward. The other two Planeteers followed. Their feet sinking slightly into the glowing sand, they trudged westward.

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They felt no change. But when Thorn tried to use his suit-audio, there came from it only a shattering roar. He linked hands with his comrades, speaking to them by conduction of sound.

"The radiation kills our audios completely," he said. "It's what deadened all our instruments as we approached Erebus."

SUAL AV nodded his black-helmeted head vigorously. "The gamma radiation alone from this mass would do that."

"How in hell's name does this whole world come to he radioactive?" Gunner muttered. "If it was thrown off the sun in a tidal disturbance like the other planets, it should consist of the same kind of matter."

"I helieve Erebus is the product of an older and deeper disturbance than that which produced the other planets," Sual Av said keenly. "A disturbance so deep that it hurled out a mass of the heavier radioactive elements at the sun's heart, which formed a huge radioactive core for this world when it hardened."

"But there must have been some non-radioactive elements here originally, even so," objected Gunner.

"Yes, hut they would inevitably he made radioactive also hy the radiation from the core," Sual Av replied. "You know, the familiar phenomenon of induced radioactlvity, which was discovered hy the old Earth scientists way hack in the first third of the twentieth century. The phenomenon by which a sheet of aluminum or some other normally non-radioactive element will become itself radioactive if suhjected to radiation from radioactive elements."

"That must be what has happened," Thorn agreed. "And any ship that landed here would instantly also become radioactive in every particle, from the same cause."

They trudged on. Weird journey scross a hlue-hazed planet beneath the eternally nighted sky! On over the desert, crunching the feebly glowing sands heneath their feet, constantly aware that the failure of the asterium coating on their space-suits would mean doom.

Thorn steered hy the stars, for the hlack metal mountain had dropped from sight hehind them. Infinitely strange it seemed, on this outermost world so far from the sun, to look up into the dusky sky and see there the familiar, glittering constellations!

Then they glimpsed the western mountains in the distance ahead, looming low, dark and barren-looking through the drifting blue mists. The Planeteers held toward those drear peaks.

"I see someone ahead!" exclaimed Sual Av suddenly, stopping, "Someone coming toward us."

"It must be Cheerly coming back!" cried Gunner, his hand darting to the asterium-coated atom-pistol belted outside his space-suit.

Thorn's heart went cold with fear. If Cheerly was coming hack with the radite, it meant Lana was already dead.

"No!" Sual Av cried, stupefied. "It'a not Cheerly and his men—look, lt's something *shining!*"

"Good God, can there be any truth in what those Saturnians told of having seen shining demons out here?" Thorn exclaimed hoarsely.

For the two creatures moving toward them through the hlue mists were unhelievable! They were manformed creatures, hut they were glowing with soft blue light!

The two shining things came on, straight toward the Planeteers. And they stopped a few yards away from the three comrades. They wore no space-suits or protection of any kind.

"God!" came Sual Av's thick-voiced exclamation. "They're men—shining men—*radioactive* men!"

Thorn's brain reeled at the sight. He felt as though he was looking at some weird mirage horn of the shining mists.

The two men hefore him were human in every respect. They wore the tattered remnants of leather clothing such as space-sailors had worn in the past. One of them was tall, rangy of body. The other was smaller, with Martian features.

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But both of the two men were *glowing*. Every atom of their bodies and of their clothing shone with faint radiance. These men were living human beings whose bodies had become as radioactive in every particle as all else on this world.

CHAPTER XVIII

Damned Souls of Erebus

THORN could not believe his eyes. The sight of men, living men, whose bodies were composed of radioactive matter that glowed with its own spontaneous energy, was brain-shattering. He and his comrades stood rigid, staring at the two glowing men.

The radioactive men returned their gaze with weirdly glowing eyes. And now Thorn saw that in their shining faces was a tragic, weary sadness and deep despair. The radiant countenance of the taller man, a strong, thin face that seemed vaguely familiar to Thorn, was a shining mask of haunting horror.

"They're men like ourselves—but men made radioactive by the terrific radiation here!" Sual Av exclaimed hoarsely. "Induced radioactivity, working somehow upon living beings!"

The Venusian's words carried by vibration of his helmet through the hazy air to the two glowing men. For the taller, the one whose face seemed vaguely familiar, answered.

"You are right," he said slowly, in a deep, strangely husked voice. "We are men like yourselves, who came to this hellish world in the past. And it made us into what you see."

"How is it possible for you to live, when your body has been changed into radioactive matter?" Thorn asked wildly. "It has never been dreamed that there could be radioactive *life!*"

"Life," said the tall glowing man heavily, "is dependent upon energy. Your bodies draw energy from their chemical processes. But my body needs now no chemical consumption of air and food to give it energy, for every atom of it now flames with the energy which itself radiates. Nothing can halt that spontaneous flow of energy from the atoms of my body. It will go on for ages until every atom has completely lost its energy and has been transmuted into elements lower in the atomic scale. I cannot die, until then."

A sound of bitter laughter tore from his lips as his glowing eyes held the three horror-stricken Planeteers.

"I cannot die, do you hear? Though I were to cut my own limbs off, though I were to hack my body, it would still live, for each atom of each fragment would still emit ceaseless energy. My brain—my consciousness—would still remain living! And even if my brain were cut to bits, each bit of it would retain the flame of my life and consciousness."

"God!" muttered Gunner Welk thickly. "Then *this* is what has befallen all the explorers of the past who came here to Erebus!"

The tall radioactive man nodded his glowing head somberly.

"Aye, it has befallen hundreds of others who came here, as it did me. I did not dream of the nature of this devil world when I came here. How could I? I thought the shining hazes a mere phosphorescence. I landed my ship—and at once my ship crumbled as certain of its metallic elements were swiftly disintergrated by the radiation. And then the radiation quickly changed my body—into *this*.

"And I have dwelt here ever since, as you see me now, A travesty of life, a mockery of a human being living on and on, unable to die, unable even to kill myself!"

"How long?" Thorn asked hoarsely. "How long have you two lived thus on this world?"

AT this the tall radioactive man pointed to his companion. "This is Chan Gray, who came from Mars to explore Erebus five centuries ago—"

"Five *centuries* ago!" Thorn cried dazedly. "You mean that he's been living here, in that horrible state, for five hundred years?"

"The thing's not possible!" ex-

claimed Gunner Welk thickly.

The taller radioactive man answered heavily. "He has been living thus five centuries, yes. I was here when he came. For I have dwelt as you see me now on Erebus for nine centuries. I landed on thia devil world in two thousand and six."

"That can't be!" objected John Thorn. "Why, in two thousand and six interplanetary travel was only a few years old! The only men who had made apace-flights by that date were Robert Roth himself, the first of them all, and hia lieutenant, Clymer Nison—"

Thorn's voice broke off as he stared in shaken borror and recognition into the glowing face of the tall radioactive man.

"God above!" Tborn cboked. "Your face! I thought it was familiar from pictures. *You*—Clymer—"

"I am Clymer Nison, yes," answered the tall glowing man dully.

A spell held the Planeteers, a trance of stupefaction and awe, as they stared at the man before them. A man whose name bad been famous in the system's history for nine hundred years, wbose name stood second only to that of Robert Roth in the great roll of the space-pioneers.

"Clymer Nison!" said Gunner hoarsely, unbelievingly. "The man who belped Robert Roth build the first space-ship of all, tbe man who was first of all men to visit Uranus, Neptune and Pluto, and who—"

"—and who wanted to be the first man to visit Erebus, also," Nison finished heavily. "And who has remained here ever since, in living death, the most horrible of dooms."

The Planeteers could not speak. They could only stare at tbe glowing man in stricken awe.

To them, as to all who sailed space, this man ranked almost as a demigod. He and the immortal Robert Roth had statues in their bonor on every inhabited planet. And now tbey had found him on this far mystery world, not really living, yet not dead!

"So long—so long ago it was tbat I came bere," Clymer Nison was saying in his heavy voice, his shining eyes staring tragically into the haunted past. "So long, since I left Earth on that fatal outward voyage tbat brought me to this doom.

"And yet there are times when all the long centuries of living death here seem but a moment, when it seems that it was only yesterday that I sailed with such higb hopes. When it seems only yesterday that I toiled with Robert to build that first ship of hia, and watched him roar out into space to glory."

"You aay there are others like you two on thia world?" Jobn Thorn askad unsteadily.

NISON nodded beavily. "Aye, there are several hundred of us radioactive men wearily roaming this hellish world. All of them men who have come here in past centuries, and bave been trapped, as I was trapped, by the deadly radiation. You are the first men I have ever seen come here and escape the doom that seized us."

"We landed on that black meteorite-mountain of asterium," Thorn told him. "And we ray-proofed our suits with the metal."

"Ask bim about the radite, John," muttered Sual Av tensely.

Jerkily, Thorn told the two glowing men what had brought them to Erebus. There was a brooding silence before Clymer Nison spoke.

"And you say that this radite will save the inner planets from dreadful conquest, if you can take it back?" he asked.

"We *hope* it will," Thorn answered tensely. "If Blaine's secret weapon is effective—"

"I do not see," said the glowing man slowly, "what weapon or inventlon could ever defeat such a fleet as you say the outer planets have gathered."

Tbe old doubt and fear that Thorn had felt increasingly as the days went by, tautened bis voice as he answered.

"We don't know either how Blaine can bope to do that, wbat the nature of his myaterious weapon is," Thorn admitted. "Yet, tbat secret of his is the one last possible chance to prevent the conquest of the Alliance."

He voiced a desperate appeal to Ni-

son. "Earth is your native world, as Mars is that of your companion. It's to prevent the wreck and ruin of those two worlds, and of Venus and Mercury too, that we're asking you to help us find the radite."

"I will help you," Clymer Nison said slowly, his tragic radiant face heavy with thought. "Though the Earth you serve cannot be the Earth of nine centuries ago from which I came, yet it is still—Earth."

His glowing companion, the little Martian, Chan Gray, slowly nodded his head, and spoke to the Planeteers for the first time.

"Aye," he said huskily. "And I remember the Mars of five centuries ago—the pleasant desert cities, the sun shining on the polar snows. I would not want the hordes of the outer planets to devastate that."

"You know where the radite lies?" Thorn asked Nison eagerly.

The glowing space-pioneer inclined his head.

He turned and pointed westward through the swirling blue haze.

"In the mountains yonder, a lump of it lies. But it will be dangerous to try to take it," he explained. "The terrific emanations that stream from that mass of radite are more penetrating than any other. To the bodies of us radioactive men who wearily wander immortally over this planet, those powerful emanations of the radite are stimulating, as sunlight is to you. There are always some of us radioactive men gathered about that radite, basking in the grateful radiation from it.

"And all these poor creatures like myself will resist your taking the radite. For to bask in its emanations is almost the only pleasure they have in this terrible mockery of existence. Yet—with the safety of Earth and the inner worlds at stake, I will help you attempt to take the radite."

Nison turned heavily, and he and his radiant companion looked back at the Planeteers.

After a moment, he spoke to them.

"Follow us," Nison's voice reached them. "We will lead you to the radite."

THEY started on westward across the shining desert, forging through the luminous blue haze beneath the dark, star-studded sky. An unearthly party—the three Planeteers in their grotesque black ray-proof space-suits, led by the two glowing radioactive men.

"It's like a nightmare," Gunner's voice reached Thorn, the Mercurian gripping his arm as they trudged along. "This hellish world, haunted by these pitiful ghosts of men."

"No wonder Martin Cain wouldn't tell anyone about what he'd seen here, when he got back," muttered Sual Av.

They forged on for hours, ever west across the dim desert. The Planeteers followed closely behind their glowing guides, but the three comrades were beginning to tire from the weight of their asterium-coated space-suits, while the two radioactive men showed no sign of fatigue.

"Damn the gravitation of this world!" Gunner gritted. "It's as strong as Earth's, and it shouldn't be half that strong on a little planet like this."

"The huge radioactive core of this world gives it its unusual mass," Sual Av declared. "And the radiation from it is responsible for the warmth that permits a gaseous atmosphere here."

Thorn's heart quickened as he saw beyond their radiant guides, a low, barren dark range of mountains looming up through the haze.

"We're getting there!" Thorn cried eagerly.

Clymer Nison and his radioactive Martian comrade led them on through a pass between two peaks. The mountains towered a few thousand feet on either side, somber, bare rock slopes faintly luminous with the emanations throbbing from their radioactive atoms.

On into the tumbled peaks, through valleys thick with the shining blue haze, over long ridges, Nison led the way. For the space-pioneer who had wandered this dreary world for nine long centuries seemed to know each square yard of its surface.

They entered a deep chasm, a gloomy gorge with precipitous shin-

ing walls and a floor strewn with fallen masses of radiant rock. Along this the two radioactive men led the way. The shimmering sand of the chasm floor was deeply marked by a path, that had been trodden by many men coming and going in past times.

To tbe Planeteers, this gorge was an awesome and uncanny place. The great shining boulders tbrough which the path wound, the feebly radiant cliffs that towered on either side, tbe strip of starry black sky far overbead, all combined to depress the spirit by their alien, forbidding atmosphere.

Through tbe blue, sbimmering hazes that floated thick in this chasm, Clymer Nison and his companion led the way. At last Nison turned.

"The radite lies in a niche in tbe side of the cliff, just ahead," he said heavily to the Planeteers. "We must be careful now, for there are almost sure to be some of my poor fellow-sufferers near it, bathing in its rays."

"I hope not," Gunner Welk muttered. "If these radioactive men can't be killed, they'd be tough customers."

They moved on, Nison and the glowing Martian leading, going more slowly and cautiously now.

AS they rounded a turn in the crooked chasm, they saw ahead a place where the sand had been beaten down by many feet, over a long time. Tbere was a small natural nicbe in the chasm wall there—but there was no radite in it.

"The radite's gone!" cried Clymer Nison in amazement, staring unbelievingly at the empty nicbe in the rock.

"Gone?" exclaimed John Thorn. His heart sank witb despair. "Then Cheerly has been bere ahead of us. He's taken the radite, and—"

"Listen!" Sual Av cried, turning his belmeted head sharply. "Hear that?"

They heard, then. A dim uproar of raging voices from farther along the chasm, punctuated every few moments by the rumbling thunder and crash of great rocks falling.

"What can it be," Nison wondered, his radiant face perplexed.

"I have an idea what it is!" Thorn cried. "Come on!"

They pressed on along the gloomy gorge. In a few minutes they had rounded another turn in it, and stopped short, petrified by the astounding scene abead.

A few hundred feet ahead in the chasm was gathered a mob of dozens of glowing men. Radioactive men like Nison and the Martian, garbed in ragged remnants of clothing that showed they were of every time in the last nine centuries, of every world. Glowing men who bad come to Erebus in past centuries and had been trapped here, transmitted into radioactive beings!

This crowd of glowing men was wildly seeking to storm a narrow ledge that jutted from the chasm wall a dozen feet up from tbe floor. With shrill, raging cries, the radioactive mob would scramble up to win the ledge, but would be repelled by the rocks rolled down upon them by the defenders.

Tbe defenders of the ledge were three men clad in asterium-coated space-suits like those of the Planeteers. Behind them was anotber figure in a coated space-suit, but with arms bound together. And also on the ledge was a rude sledge of black asterium, upon whicb was tied a small mass of something that had been carefully wrapped in thick sheets of asterium.

"It's Cheerly and bis men, and the bound figure is Lana!" Thorn exclaimed hoarsely. "And that mass on the sledge—"

"Must be the radite!" Gunner Welk cried. "Cheerly got the stuff from the niche, but the radioactive men caught him taking it!"

CHAPTER XIX

Cheerly's Cunning

THE scene was one out of nightmare. The gloomy chasm of shimmering blue haze, the shining cliff upon a ledge of which the three space-suited men desperately defended themselves, and the insanely sbouting, raging mob of weirdly glowing radio-

active men who attacked them.

John Thorn, his heart hammering at having come within actual sight of hoth Lana Cain and the precious radite, leaped forward. But the upraised warning hand of Clymer Nison stopped him.

"No!" said the glowing man. "That raging crowd of doomed ones would tear you to pieces if you tried to make your way through them. For very many of my fellow-sufferers on this world are crazed, made mad by our horrible existence."

"We've got to get Lana and the radite out of there quickly!" Thorn cried. "Cheerly and his men can't hold that mob off much longer!"

Cheerly and his two men were plainly heing hard pressed. Only hy snatching up shining rocks that lay strewn on the narrow ledge, and dashing them down at their attackers, could they keep the radioactive men from winning up to them.

"They'll run out of rocks soon and that'll be the end of them!" Sual Av exclaimed.

"Why the devil don't they use their atom-pistols?" Gunner demanded.

"They would be useless against such men as myself," Clymer Nison declared sadly. "I know a way to get onto that ledge farther hack along the chasm. Follow me!"

The Planeteers raced back along the chasm after Nison and his companion. The glowing men swerved and started climhing up a narrow crack in the shimmering cliff.

Thorn and his comrades struggled to follow. By tremendous effort, they hoisted their heavy figures up after the two glowing men. They found themselves on a precariously narrow shelf of the rock wall.

Nison and the glowing Martian led the way now back along the chasm to the battle, following this narrow shelf. There were places where it was hardly a yard wide. But in a few minutes, they had followed it to a point where it connected with the ledge upon which Cheerly and his men were defending themselves.

Cheerly turned, appalled, as the Planeteers and their two glowing guides appeared. The Uranian, unrecognizahle in his shapeless spacesuit and coated helmet, made himself known hy the cry that vibrated from him as he saw them.

"Have you come from the ship to help?" Cheerly cried, not recognizing the Planeteers. "How did you get here with those two glowing devils?"

"We came after you, Cheerly!" Thorn cried throbbingly. The Uranian shrank back as he heard Thorn's voice.

"The Planeteers!" he exclaimed wildly.

Lana stumbled forward, unrecognizable in her ray-proofed suit, but her silver voice wildly glad from Inside it.

"John! John Thorn!" she cried. "I knew you wonld follow somehow."

Thorn, gripping her tightly for a moment, saw heyond her the little asterium sledge, and the mass upon it which was wrapped in the sheets of asterium Cheerly had prepared and hrought. That mass was no more than four feet in diameter each way, and a corner of it that protruded through the hastily wrapped sheets showed that it was a huge chunk of dense matter hlazing with intolerable white hrilliance.

HERE was the radite, at last! The isotope that was the rarest element in existence, the block of hlazing matter that contained locked within it incalculable power that might sway the future of the whole system!

"I knew you would escape from Saturn and come after us," Lana was sobhing wildly. "But I feared—"

"John, here they come!" Gunner Welk yelled wildly.

The radioactive moh helow were scrambling up to the attack again. And this time, as though enraged hy the appearance of the newcomers with two of their own glowing kind, the maddened moh of radiant men came with ferocious determination.

There was no time for Thorn to deal Cheerly the fate he deserved, no time for anything. The first of the glowing men was already scrambling onto the ledge!

Gunner fired his atom-pistol at them viciously. But the flare of blinding energy did not harm the glowing men. The emanations from their radioactive bodies simply repelled that energy.

"Use rocks!" Thorn yelled, stooping and picking up a chunk of shimmering stone and hurling it.

It knocked one of the glowing men off the ledge. But others were scrambling onto it. It became a wild battle to hold the ledge against them.

Clymer Nison and Chan Gray, the glowing Martian, fought by the side of the Planeteers and Cheerly's men. They seized glowing attackers and hurled them down. But still others gained the ledge, and it became a crazy hand-to-hand mêlée.

Thorn, struggling in the insane grip of one of the glowing men, saw others tear the helmet off one of Cheerly's followers. As the terrific radiation omnipresent on this planet struck the luckless Saturnian's unprotected face, he screamed like a hurt animal. And almost instantly, his face and body began to glow with that ghastly blue emanation.

The Planeteers fought with their metal-clad fists. Gunner Welk's great arms swept a clear circle around him, the big Mercurian roaring. Sual Av pulled off a glowing attacker who had leaped on Thorn's back and was trying to wrench away his helmet.

For minutes the crazy struggle went on. A fight with maddened lost souls on a planet of the damned! But with Nison and the Martian helping, the Planeteers forced the radiant men back off the ledge. They gathered below, howling with fury.

Thorn turned quickly. Lana was stumbling to her feet from the back of the ledge.

"John, Cheerly's gone!" she cried. "While you were fighting, he and his remaining man slipped away along the ledge with the sledge of radite! They struck me down—"

Thorn whirled, wild with rage and apprehension. The cunning Uranian, seizing the opportunity when the Planeteers were engaged in the wild mêlée, had with his remaining follower stolen away with the radite. They could be seen now in the distance, hurrying along the shelf by which the Planeteers had come to the ledge.

"After them!" Thorn cried.

They rushed back along the shelf, Nison and Chan Gray following joining in pursuit of the two fugitives. Rapidly they gained on the two fugitives who were encumbered with the sledge.

They saw Cheerly and his follower round a narrow place in the shelf ahead. As they rushed after them, atomic shells burst ahead and a mass of the shimmering cliff was dislodged by the flare of energy and fell in an avalanche across the shelf. It blocked the narrow way completely, halting the Planeteers.

"CHEERLY used their pistols to cause that rock-fall!" Sual Av cried furiously.

"Down to the floor of the chasm! We'll follow that way, and beat them back to the ship!" Thorn shouted.

"We can't!" the Venusian cried. "Look, that mob has followed us!"

The maddened crowd of radioactive men below, seeing the Planeteers' party moving away along the narrow ledge, had followed along the floor of the chasm. They were gathered now below, preparing to climb up in furious attack once more.

"We're trapped!" Gunner Welk yelled. "We can't go further along the ledge and we can't go down through that crazy mob!"

Already the crazed radioactive men were climbing up to the ledge. Lana uttered a hopeless cry.

Thorn swept her behind him, and he and his comrades and their two glowing friends sprang to repel the assault of the shining horde. With rocks, with their fists, with their clubbed atom-pistols, they beat back their insensate attackers.

But again and again the radioactive men came up at them. Time was dragging past. Thorn felt as though he were struggling in an endless nightmare of horror and despair.

The radioactive attackers had limbs broken, bodies crushed in many places —yet still they came on. The flame of

strange energy and life that throbbed in every atom of their bodies could not be extinguished or dimmed by any bodily barm.

As the glowing men below gathered for another charge up the rock wall, Clymer Nison spoke to the exhausted, staggering Planeteers.

"I may be able to turn them," said the space-pioneer. "It is a chance to stop Cheerly."

Thorn saw Nison atep to the edge of the ledge and speak to the radioactive horde gathering again below.

"There is no use in attacking us any longer!" Nison cried to them. "We do not have the radite. Tbose who took it from the niche have fled witb it, and are escaping!"

A chorus of insanely raging yells answered him, as the half-crazy horde started forward to climb again to tbe attack. But a huge Jovian among the glowing horde beld back his companions.

"Clymer Nison speaks truth!" he shouted. "See, tbe radite is gone from the ledge and so are some of tbe men. We must scatter and searcb for the thieves!"

"Scatter and search!" went up the husky, furious shout from the radioactive mob.

They began to split up, starting along the chasm in both directions, searching carefully for Cheerly and the radite.

"By heaven, Nison, your idea worked!" panted John Thorn. "Quick, now—we've got to get back to the meteorite-mountain. That's where Cheerly will have beaded with the radite."

"There's nothing for us to fear, since Stilicho and his men hold Cheerly's ship and crew prisoner," Sual Av gasped.

"Cheerly must know something has happened to his ship," Thorn retorted. "Tbat Uranian is a devil for cleverness."

Thorn helped Lana as they scrambled down the rock wall, to the floor of the cbasm.

And as they started at a trot back eastward, he half-supported, half-carried the staggering girl.

THEIR two radioactive allies, Nison and the Martian, led the way out of the barren mountains. They saw none of the glowing horde, which had split in all directions to search furiously for the takers of the radite.

Lana, suffering from exhaustion and nervous reaction, could hardly walk. Yet she trudged valiantly with the last of her strength as they hastened over the dim desert.

"John, if we get the radite away from Cheerly now, will it be in time to save the Alliance?" she panted.

"Yes. Haskell Trask will not launch his attack until he hears from Cheerly that the radite has been secured," Thorn told ber. "If we get the stuff back to Earth's moon, and if Philip Blaine's weapon really works—"

He stopped, that goading doubt torturing his mind, tbat chilling, unvoiced fear that Blaine's mysterious invention might prove a failure.

Tbe buge black mass of the domed meteorite-mountain loomed slowly out of the shimmering blue mists, bulking darkly against the starry sky. They pressed toward its base, and were starting to climb up its rough asterium side, when a sound reached their ears. The roar of a ship's rocket-tubes!

"Look!" Sual Av yelled frantically, pointing upward. "Tbe *Gargol*."

The Saturnian cruiser was blasting off, rising from where it bad been parked beside the *Venture*, with a reverberating roar of tubes. It sbot up at dizzying speed, and disappeared in the dark sky.

"God, Cheerly has got away in it, somehow," Gunner cried hoarsely.

They scrambled frantically on up the mountain, driven by overmastering fear. When they came to where the *Venture* lay, they stopped, aghast.

A fight had taken place bere. A half-dozen space-suited pirates lay in a scorched, dead heap. Other men in space-suits were running out from the *Venture*.

Out of that little crowd sprang a gray beast with blazing green eyes, that limped on a scorcbed leg as it

hounded frantically toward Lana and nuzzled against her. After the space-dog came Stilicho Keene, his wrinkled face recognizable through bis glassite helmet.

"You brought the lass back!" he cried, joy lighting his faded eyes. Then as his gaze fell on the glowing forms of Clymer Nison and Chan Gray, he gasped, "But who—"

"What happened here? Who was in the *Gargol* when it took off?" Thorn cried fiercely.

"Cheerly—and that there radite!" groaned the old pirate. "He fooled us, neat. He and his man came up here a half-hour ago, dragging the radite on their sledge. They were wearing suits like yours, ray-proofed and with even the helmets coated, so we couldn't see their faces plain enough. And Cheerly imitated your voice so that I thought he was you, John Thorn!

"He said tbat he and Sual Av had brougbt the radite back, and that Gunner was following with Lana. We never suspected him, he imitated your voice so well, and we couldn't even recognize his fat figure in that shapeless suit. He took the radite into the *Gargol*, saying we'd use the Saturnian ship to return to Earth in. He even went into the *Venture* for a few minutes—I suppose to see if you'd any papers or secrets worth stealing."

HE fell silent.

"Go on, man!" Thorn cried. "How did he get away with the *Gargol*, when you had its crew under guard?"

"He did it easy," groaned the old man. "He and his man, posing as you and Sual Av, went into the *Gargol*. We didn't follow, never suspecting. And Cheerly and his man hlasted down our guards in there, set free his Saturnian crew, and took off, with a hlast of their guns that killed six of our men!"

"And now he's on his way back to Saturn with the radite!" Gunner cried. "We've got to catch him!"

"We'll catch him—the *Venture* can overhaul him!" Thorn cried. "Into the ship, all of you! We're blasting off!"

They tumbled into the *Venture*, leaving the two radioactive men standing staring. Inside the craft, its doors closed, the Planeteers and Lana and Stilicho climbed to the control-room. The old pirate yelled urgently into the Interphone.

"Power chambers on!" he ordered.

They heard the clash of the injectors below, and then the rising roar of the power-chambers.

A terrific explosion shook the ship next moment. They were all thrown from their feet, and heard cries of pain and terror from helow.

"Good God, something's let go!" Gunner yelled.

Thorn led as they hastily climbed down to the stern compartment that housed the four hig power-chambers.

The compartment was a wreck. The power-chambers had exploded with frightful force, killing three pirate engineers.

"That damned Cheerly must have done this when he came into the *Venture!*" a wounded, staggering engineer gasped. "The power-chamber safety was jammed — *deliberately* jammed!"

"Cheerly's won again, curse him!" Gunner yelled wildly. "It'll take us days to rebuild these power-chambers, if we can do it at all. And by that time he'll he half-way hack to Saturn!"

CHAPTER XX

At Uranus' Orbit

THE cruel stars ahove Erebus looked down upon a scene of strange activity. Out of the dimly shining deserts of that terrihle world, out of the shimmering blue hazes that perpetually wrapped its surface, rose the huge black hulk of a rounded metal mountain. And on the top of that mountain, space-suited men who staggered from days of frantic labor were now nearing tbe end of their toil.

The *Venture* was heing made ready for blast-off. New power-chambers had been huilt into the sbip in the

days that had passed. Lacking inertrum with which to build the new chambers, John Thorn had used the metal of the mountain, the black asterium which was fully as strong as inertrum itself. With atomic furnaces and atomic welding-torches, the Planeteers and Stilicho's pirates had labored almost unceasingly to construct the new chambers. Lana Cain's order had been enough to make the pirates obey Thorn utterly.

Thorn had been torn with almost unbearable apprehension in these days of terrible toil. Each day, each hour, meant that Jenk Cheerly was millions of miles farther toward Saturn with the radite. No one of them all, except Thorn himself, believed there was the slightest chance to overtake the spy-master now.

Gunner Welk and Sual Av, reeling with fatigue, stumbled up to where Thorn was superintending the last preparations.

"All ready, as far as I can see," Gunner said hoarsely.

Stilicho Keene and Lana came up anxiously as he spoke.

"Boy, are ye crazy to think that you can overtake the *Gargol* when it's got days' start of us?" quavered Stilicho.

"We'll overtake them," Thorn said fiercely. "We've got to!"

"But to do it, we'd have to travel three times as fast as any space-ship ever traveled before!" Stilicho exclaimed.

"That's what we're going to do!" Thorn clipped.

They stared at him, as though they believed his mind had been strained by the days of superhuman toil and anxiety.

"We're going to use radioactive matter for fuel in our power-chambers!" Thorn explained. "It will yield several times as much power as ordinary metallic fuel. We can get up to a speed no ship has ever attained before!"

"But no one's ever dared use radioactive fuel before," Lana whispered stunnedly. "It would crumble any power-chamber it was used in."

"You forget we've got asterium power-chambers in the *Venture* now!" Thorn cried. "And asterium is proof against radioactivity."

The daring originality of Thorn's plan burst upon the others, taking their breath away.

"By heaven, it may work!" Gunner exclaimed excitedly. "If the power doesn't make our rocket-tubes backblast."

"We'll have to take that chance," John Thorn said harshly. He turned. "Here come Clymer Nison and Chan Gray now. They volunteered to bring the radioactive fuel we'll need."

The two glowing figures of the radioactive men were coming up onto the top of the metal mountain, dragging after them the asterium sledge. Upon the sledge, in a rudely forged asterium box, was a great mass of shining mineral.

Thorn's quick orders superintended the pirate engineers as they carried the asterium box of minerals into the *Venture*, and prepared it for use. Then Thorn turned to the two radiant radioactive men.

"We're ready to start," he told Clymer Nison haggardly. "We want you to come back with us, to Earth."

NISON shook his shining head sadly. "That cannot be. We would be death to you. The radiation from our bodies would slay you, in time, and would disintegrate your ship."

"But you can't stay here, wandering this hellish world forever!" Thorn cried. "You, one of the greatest of men in the system's history, you whom Earth would welcome with joy."

Clymer Nison's haunted, shining eyes looked past them, far away into tragic memory.

"To Earth I am dead, now," he said slowly. "And the Earth I knew nine centuries ago, is dead, too. It must remain that way. But one thing you can do for us."

"Anything you name!" Thorn exclaimed.

"You can give us poor damned souls upon this world, us radioactive men, the boon of real death," Nison said. "If scientists of Earth came here with the needed mechanisms, they could

end the flame of unhuman life within us by using forces to transmute the radioactive atoms of our bodies into pure energy, dissipating our atomic structure, our life and consciousness, forever. That is the greatest gift you could give us—the peace of death."

Thorn felt a hard lump in his throat. It was moments before he could answer.

"It shall be done," he choked. "A party of scientists will be sent here to do what you ask."

He turned toward the awe-stricken group behind him who were staring in deep silence at the tragic, glowing men.

"We must start," Thorn said unsteadily. "Into the ship!"

Inside the *Venture*, the Planeteers climbed again with Lana and Stilicho to the control-room, while the door was ground shut. They removed their space-suits, and then Stilicho nervously gave the order into the interphone.

"Power-chambers on!"

All stiffened, as from below came the soft, rising roar of the chambers, growing rapidly to a thunderous throbbing that shook the whole fabric of the cruiser. The radioactive fuel, being broken down in the power-chambers, was yielding such unprecedented torrents of energy as to threaten a new explosion.

"Blast off!" Thorn told the old pirate.

Stilicho's thin hands descended on the firing-keys. With a raving roar of released titanic energy, a spuming plume of fire from their rocket-tubes, the *Venture* shot skyward.

Up from the domed metal mountain, up from the shimmering blue hazes of Erebus, the cruiser arrowed, picking up speed with appalling acceleration. Air screamed briefly outside, then faded away.

Night-black space, starred with the bright yellow speck of the far-distant sun, lay ahead. Rocketing faster and faster, shuddering and creaking to the thrust of its tubes, the *Venture* flashed on.

Sual Av was hanging tensely over the instrument panel, and the Venusian's green eyes flashed as he turned.

"Instruments are operating again!" he reported. "But our audio was permanently wrecked by the radiation of Erebus."

"Lay a course straight for Saturn," Thorn ordered Stilicho. "Cheerly will be making straight for that world, and we'll be following him directly."

GUNNER WELK grunted.

"And if we catch up to him," he gritted, "I've got plans for what I'll do to that Uranian."

"Shall I cut some of the tubes now?" the old pirate asked nervously. "We're shaking now like we're fit to come apart."

"No! Leave all stern tubes on for utmost acceleration!" Thorn rapped, his haggard, worn, brown face stiff with desperate determination. "We'll either wreck this ship by back-blasting, or we'll overtake Cheerly—one of the two!"

Lana came silently to Thorn's side, looked up at him with a deep anxiety in her blue eyes.

"John, you must sleep a little," she begged. "For days you've been toiling and worrying. You'll collapse unless you rest."

"Rest? How can I rest when the radite we've come through hell to get is millions of miles ahead of us!" Thorn said rawly.

As the next hours passed, the rocket-tubes of the *Venture* continued to roar unceasingly, the ship quivering and creaking sickeningly. Their speed was mounting to tremendous heights—already they were traveling faster than the fastest ship in the system's history.

And still the stern tubes roared, the *Venture's* velocity accelerated. Erebus faded to a dim speck behind them, vanished. The sun-star was brighter and bigger ahead, and the yellow spark of Saturn was largening dead ahead.

Time passed, slow, tense hours that dragged into a full day, and then another. The exhausted Planeteers and pirates took turns sleeping and watching. They could not know how fast they were traveling now—the instru-

ments were not calibrated for such tremendous velocity—but knew their speed must be an appalling one.

They neared the orbit of Uranus, and by now Saturn presented a perceptible disk ahead. Thorn haggardly watched the little glowing sphere of the aura-chart.

"Cheerly's ship can't be far ahead of us now," he estimated. "The highest speed the *Gargol* could attain would bring it about this far by now."

Lana stood with her gold head by his shoulder, watching as tensely as he.

"There, John!" she cried in a moment, pointing.

In the fore of the aura-chart a red speck had appeared, a ship a million miles ahead of the *Venture*.

"That's the *Gargol*—it must be!" Thorn cried. "Cut the stern tubes, Gunner!"

Gunner Welk, standing turn at the firing-keys, obeyed instantly. But the aura-chart showed they were still rushing after their quarry with such speed that they would flash past it. Thorn ordered the bow-tubes fired for the purpose of slowing them down.

AS the ship rocked and quivered to the blasting brake-thrust of the tubes, Sual Av came up into the control-room, sleepily rubbing his eyes. Old Stilicho's anxious face was behind him.

"We'll come up to Cheerly soon," Thorn rapped. "That means a fight. He'll never give up that radite willingly."

"The *Gargol* has heavier batteries than we do, and a bigger crew," reminded Stilicho Keene.

"But we can outmaneuver them!" Lana said. She cried into the interphone to the pirate crew, "On suits and prepare for action, men!"

"Go down and take command of our batteries, Gunner," Thorn ordered. "I'll take the controls. Suits on, everyone!"

In a few moments Thorn, in his space-suit now like the others, was poised over the firing-keys. Sual Av tautly watched the aura-chart, while Lana and old Stilicho peered ahead.

"We're close," muttered the Venusian, his eyes on the chart.

"There's the *Gargol!*" Lana cried suddenly, pointing ahead through the glassite window. "And they've spotted us!"

Thorn saw the Saturnian cruiser in the black, starry vault ahead—a long torpedolike shape pluming white fire from its rocket-tubes as it put on all possible speed to escape. Jenk Cheerly obviously had no desire to risk battle.

But the *Venture*, imbued with its unprecedented potential speed, swiftly came up on the tail of the naval cruiser. Now atom-shells began to burst in blinding flares near Thorn's ship as the *Gargol* cut loose with its stern guns.

"I'm going to run up under their keel!" Thorn called into the interphone. "Try to score a hit on their stern tubes, Gunner!"

The *Gargol* veered around suddenly ahead, to bring its broadside batteries into play. The heavily-gunned cruiser loosed a brief hail of shells in the direction of the *Venture*.

But the pirate ship shot clear like lightning as Thorn smashed down a key. Swiftly, it veered after the Saturnian ship, seeking to run beneath its keel.

The *Gargol* rolled, to keep presenting its guns toward its enemy. For a brief moment the two ships rushed side by side through space, their rocket-tubes flaming and their guns pouring shell at each other.

Whizzing white flares of energy burst around the *Venture*, and it rocked wildly as it was hit. Red lights flashed on in the panel before Thorn, warning that two keel compartments had been holed.

But Gunner's pirates were not idle. They were concentrating all their fire upon the *Gargol's* stern, hoping to wreck its tubes and completely disable the cruiser. The Saturnian ship volleyed upward through space in a sharp veering turn to escape that fire.

"We didn't get 'em!" Stilicho muttered. "But they'll get *us* if we come to close quarters again. Their guns and inertrum armor are too heavy for us!"

"We're closing in again!" Thorn exclaimed, his black eyes blazing now. He called down to Gunner, "Stand ready! *And get those stern-tubes!*"

LIKE two fighting hawks of space, locked in a death combat out here in the lonely immensity of starry space, the two ships maneuvered. Then again, using his superior speed, Thorn drove the *Venture* in close against the Saturnian ship.

Guns of the *Gargol* vomited shell that blinded Thorn as they broke around the *Venture*. He clung with wild recklessness to the side of the enemy, as Gunner's batteries let go.

"They're hit!" Lana cried, her blue eyes blazing with electric excitement.

The *Gargol's* clustered stern rocket-tubes had been struck by a salvo of atom-shells that had blasted the tubes into a fused, horribly twisted mass of inertrum.

They saw the Saturnian cruiser rock wildly as the fused rocket-tubes back-blasted. An instant later, they saw a vastly greater explosion rip out the whole stern wall of the *Gargol*, blowing mangled men and twisted metal into space.

"Their tubes back-blasted into the power-chambers, and the chambers themselves let go!" cried Sual Av, momentarily aghast. "It must have killed almost everyone aboard!"

"We're going aboard the wreck!" John Thorn exclaimed. "Take over, Stilicho, and run us alongside."

The old pirate brought the *Venture* quickly alongside the silent, drifting wreck. Magnetic grapples hooked on, and then the Planeteers and Lana and a dozen pirates donned space-suits and clambered through the great hole that had been torn in the stern of the Saturnian ship.

The interior of the *Gargol* was a scene of utter devastation. The terrific violence of the explosion had bent solid inertrum like tin, had slain most of the crew outright. A few space-suited Saturnians who had survived dazedly raised their hands in token of surrender.

"The radite? Where is it?" Thorn demanded fiercely of them.

"In the lower bow-compartment," answered the stunned, shaking men.

The Planeteers pushed through the wreck toward that compartment. They burst into it, and Thorn sprang forward with a cry.

The asterium-wrapped mass of radite was in this metal chamber. But toward the precious element was crawling Jenk Cheerly, his body badly crushed inside his space-suit, but with a heavy atom-gun in his hand. The Uranian, fatally injured by the explosion, was making a dying attempt to destroy the radite.

Thorn tore the gun from his hand. Cheerly looked up, his face livid gray-green inside his glassite helmet, his small eyes glistening with undying hatred.

"You've—not won, Planeteers!" he choked. "You're too late. I notified the Leader days ago by audio that I had the radite, and the League fleet rocketed then to conquer the Alliance! Already they're driving the Alliance navies sunward!

"And what is more," he gloated in a dying whisper, "Haskell Trask himself and a picked strong force have landed on Earth's moon and seized Philip Blaine and his weapon! The radite is useless to you now!"

A LAST flicker of life throbbed in Cheerly's little eyes, a last gleam of triumph.

"I was—always too clever for you—Planeteers!" he choked. And then his broken body relaxed as death came.

Thorn looked up at the others, his brown face grave inside his helmet. "If what he said is true—"

"I'll find out with the *Gargol's* audio!" Sual Av cried, and sprang toward the control-room.

When the Venusian came back, his face was pale, his green eyes stricken. He spoke unsteadily.

"It's true, John! I heard the audio-calls. The Alliance navies have retreated sunward past the orbit of Venus, attacked by the League's tremendous fleet. The inner worlds are in wild panic, and Haskell Trask is directing the League operations from

the advanced base he's established on Earth's moon!"

Thorn's body sagged inside his space-suit. For the first time, ultimate despair claimed him.

"Then this radite that might have saved the Alliance *is* useless," he said hoarsely. "With Trask holding the moon—Blaine's weapon in his possession—the Alliance is doomed!"

CHAPTER XXI

The Fight on the Moon

LANA CAIN gripped Thorn's arm. The pirate girl's blue eyes blazed with compelling force into his.

"No, John!" she exclaimed. "There's still a chance. We can attack Trask's force on the moon and recapture Blaine's weapon. We can give Blaine a chance to operate it!"

"Recapture the moon?" Thorn echoed deadly. He laughed bitterly. "With the few dozen of us, with this one ship, against the strong force Haskell Trask has there?"

"We can get a force strong enough to take the moon!" Lana cried.

"Where?" he asked dully. "Every ship of the Alliance navies is inside Venus' orbit, retreating from the League fleet."

"We can get a force at Turkoon!" the pirate girl flared. "The Companions of Space—my pirates! There's enough of them to capture the moon, if they'll follow me!"

Thorn's dead, hopeless eyes lit with a faint spark of desperate hope. He gripped Lana's shoulders.

"It *could* be done!" he cried hoarsely. "But will they follow you in such an attack, Lana?"

"I'm afraid they won't, lass," Stilicho said apprehensively. "To the Companions, the war between the League and the Alliance doesn't mean anything."

"I think I can get them to follow me," Lana insisted with desperate determination. "It's the last chance for the Alliance, John!"

"We'll take it!" Thorn cried. "Quick, get the radite into the *Venture!* Every minute counts now!"

With urgent haste, the precious radite was transferred to the pirate ship. Also the few dazed survivors in the Saturnian cruiser were brought along as prisoners by Thorn and his party. In a few moments it had been done, and Thorn ordered Stilicho to start.

"Top speed toward the Zone, Stilicho!" he cried. "Everything may depend on how soon we reach Turkoon."

Like a shooting star, the *Venture* swept sunward as it again built up to phenomenal speed. For hour after hour it raced toward the Zone, while the Planeteers and Lana took turns relieving the old pirate at the controls.

Thorn's state of mind was chaotic, hope alternating with despair. The knowledge that the long-menaced attack of the League had finally been launched, that the Alliance navies were desperately retreating from the overpowering armada of the outer planets, was a goading agony.

Stilicho was again at the firing-keys when the *Venture* at last swept into the Zone. Speed had necessarily been reduced, and Thorn chafed at the delay as the old pirate navigated through the wilderness of great meteor-swarms and planetoids.

Then Turkoon appeared, a pale green speck in the distance, largening rapidly. Down through the atmosphere of the pirate asteroid swept the ship, toward the field of parked ships that adjoined the straggling metal patch of Turkoon Town.

THEY landed, and Lana and the old pirate and the Planeteers were first outside the *Venture*. A crowd of hundreds of pirates and their women was approaching hastily from the town.

Thorn recognized Brun Aho, the scarred-faced Jovian pirate captain, and Kinnel King, the handsome Earthman. They, and all the mass of hundreds of Companions, uttered shouts of joy as they recognized Lana.

"You're back, Lana! We thought you dead for sure!" shouted Brun Aho joyfully. Then the Jovian's face stif-

fened and his band darted to his pistol as hs recognized Thorn and Sual Av and Gunner. "The Planeteers!"

"The Planetears and Stilicho were the ones who rescued me!" Lana's silver voica rang out.

She faced the jóyfully shouting mob of pirates gathered in the pale sunshine on the field. Her white face was determined, as she spoke to them in quick, ringing words.

"Companions, you know of the attack tha League ls making upon tbe Alliance," she began.

"Aye!" roared a pirate in the throng. "We've heard on the audio. The latest word is that the League fleat has pushad the Alliance navies inside Mercury's orbit, and are trying to trap them and bring them to battle!"

"We can save the Alliance from defeat, Companions!" Lana cried, her blue eyes flashing. "On Earth's moon is a great weapon that can defeat the League, if it could be used. But Haskell Trask and a strong force hold the moon. Tbat weapon can't be used unless we pirates storm the moon, and recapture it!"

There was a dead silence. The pirates looked at each other. Then a tall Martian broke the silence.

"Why should we do that, Lana?" he demanded. "Whether the League or the Allianca wins means nothing to us. Now, while this war is going on, is our chance to raid all commerce."

"Does it mean nothing to you that the world of your birth is about to be conquered and enslaved by a tyrant?" Lana asked passionately. "You, Kinnel—you are an Earthman, will you let Earth be ground under Trask's heel? Most of you were born on the inner worlds. You may be outlaws and pirates now, but surely you have some patriotism left?

"And you, Brun Abo," she continued scorchingly to the Jovian, "you fled from Jupiter and became an outlaw to escape Trask's tyranny. So did nearly all you other outer-planet men. Now is your chance to strike back at the dictator who enslaved the outer worlds and now is trying to enslave the inner onas also!"

"That's all very well, Lana," grumbled Brun Abo. "But I still don't see why we should fight for the Alliance."

"Aye," called a Venusian pirate. "Lst's do any fighting we do for ourselves."

"You *will* be fighting for yourselves!" Lana flared. "You'll be fighting to establish in the Zone the new, independent world I've dreamed so long of establishing here."

LANA went on to tell tbem of her cherishsd dream of making an independent world of the Zone, that might be a refuge to all the oppressed of the system, in the future.

"*That's* what you'll be fighting for!" shs finished fierily. "For if Haskell Trask wins and dominates the whols system, that dream can never be realized. But if the Alliance wins, they'll help us establish our world here, from gratitude!"

The Companions' eyes were shining now as thsy listened. Lana's plan, revealed to them for the first time, had fired them with excited enthusiasm.

"We follow you then, Lana!" they yelled.

"Ab, now you're talking lika true Companions," cackled old Stilicho Keene.

"All sbips prepare to blast off with full crews!" Lana's voice rang. "We'li need every man. Trask must have a heavy force of cruisers and men on the moon."

"Ho, we'll show the cursed tyrant how the Companions of Space fight!" boomed Brun Abo.

Kinnel King's eyes were burning.

"It will be good to strike a blow for old Earth," he muttered, as he hurried off.

The jungle-surrounded field became a scene of intense, shouting activity as the hundred ships of tbe Companions were hastily prepared. Lana had ordered a new audio bastily installed in the *Venture* to replace its damaged one. She and the Planeteers listened to the storm of messages vibrating through the system, carrying word of the League's continued pursuit of the Alliance fleet.

"There's so little time!" Thorn mur-

mured hoarsely. "And, even if we can recapture the moon, if Blaine's invention fails—"

Stilicho hurst into the control-room. "All ships ready to start, lass!" he cried.

"Take over, Stilicho," she ordered, and then spoke ringingly into the audio.

"Our course is straight sunward out of the Zone, then directly toward Earth's moon at top speed. Blast off!"

With a roar of tuhes, the *Venture* leaped up from the field. And as it cometed up through the atmosphere of Turkoon, the five-score pirate cruisers were rising like a flock of falcons behind it, following its lead.

"Keep down our speed to the top speed of the others!" Lana told the old pirate.

Out through the Zone, a hundred strong, throhhed the grim formation of pirate ships, streaming in short columns after the *Venture*, that led the way through the swarms and whirling planetoids. Quickly they emerged from the Zone, and headed toward the hright, shining planet and smaller satellite that were Earth and its moon.

Thorn stared feverishly toward their goal, as the pirate fleet picked up speed in empty space. Somewhere there in the harren moon was Trask, and somewhere there, too, was the mysterious mechanism that might, or might not, decide the destiny of worlds.

Gunner Welk and Sual Av peered forth with him. The Planeteers all three sensed that they were approaching a show-down in their long struggle against the League dictator.

Lana watched from heside old Stilicho, the space-dog, Ool, pressing anxiously against her side.

"Trask is sure to have a heavy force there with him on the moon," she murmured. "If we don't manage to break through—"

"We will!" Thorn exclaimed. "You've set these pirates of yours on fire with that plan to estahlish the Zone as a new world. They feel now that they're fighting for *their* world, too."

ROCKET-TUBES spouting white fire from straining power-chamhers, the pirate force swept on for hour after hour. At last they had crossed Mars' orhit and were thundering on at hazardous speed toward Earth and its satellite.

Earth largened ahead. Upon the great, gray, cloudy sphere, Thorn could glimpse the outlines of the familiar continents, the white sheen of the polar snows. And the moon was expanding, too — lifeless, gleaming white sphere, all its earthward face in full sunlight.

"Cut to landing-speed!" Lana cried into the audio, and the velocity of the pirate ships began to lessen.

Sual Av, from the 'scope eyepiece, shouted to John Thorn, who was now holding the controls of the *Venture*.

"League cruisers are pouring up out of Copernicus crater—at least a hundred and fifty of them!"

"Then Copernicus must he where Philip Blaine's lahoratories are, where Trask is now!" Gunner yelled.

"We'll hit those cruisers hefore they can form up for hattle!" Thorn cried. "On suits, everybody! Give the order, Lana!"

As the pirate girl shouted the order into the audio, the pirate ships grouped swiftly together into a phalanx of which the *Venture* was the apex. And as they drove straight down toward the lunar surface, the crews struggled hastily into their suits.

Thorn, at the controls, saw the sunlit surface of the moon rushing up toward them, an airless, white desert plain, with Copernicus crater almost directly underneath, the vast white blankness of the Mare Imbrium northward, and the towering Appenines northwestward.

Out of the circular crater of Copernicus, a fifty-mile plain surrounded hy a ring of stupendous peaks, League cruisers were swarming up like startled hornets from their nest. But before they could gain altitude or fall into battle formation, the phalanx of pirate ships crashed down among them.

It was a whirling chaos of hattle

then for minutes—a raging dogfight of League and pirate ships low across the surface of the moon. Atom-shells clogged space with blinding flares, fatally hit ships went whirling down out of control to crash on the lunar desert, other ships collided in mid-space and tumbled in a single twisted mass of wreckage.

But the Companions of Space maintained their formation. The pirates were fighting with traditional ferocity, pouring shells from every gun, increasing the disorganization of the League ships. Unable to form up, broken into scattered groups of ships that rapidly fell prey to the concentrated fire of the pirates, Trask's squadron was losing two ships to the pirates' one.

When but a score of the League ships survived, those survivors turned and fled back toward Copernicus. At once, Thorn swung the *Venture* around in the same direction.

"After them!" he shouted. "Now's our chance!"

More than sixty pirate ships had survived that terrific battle above the moon. They raced after the *Venture*, toward Copernicus.

Thorn glimpsed the League cruisers landing in the great crater, their crews pouring forth in space-suits, retreating across the crater to where a great glassite window glistened in its floor.

DOWN into the crater swept the Companions' ships, landing near the deserted League cruisers. The Planeteers and old Stilicho and Lana raced down to the door of their ship, the excited pirate crew gathering to follow them out. "Lana, you can't go with us!" Thorn cried.

The girl's eyes flashed inside her glassite helmet.

"I go!" she flared. "I've led the Companions to battle before, and I'm leading them now!"

The door opened, and they poured out onto the surface of the moon, onto the floor of the giant crater. Out of all the other ships, the space-suited pirates were pouring in hundreds.

"Follow, men!" Lana's voice rang from her suit-audio. "See, they run before us!"

The League sailors were retreating still toward that big glassite window set in the floor of the crater. They were firing back at the pirates with their atom-guns as they retreated.

The Planeteers and Lana and Stilicho led the pirate rush forward. And beside the girl bounded the blazing-eyed space-dog. Ool was in his native element upon the airless surface of the moon!

Thorn saw that the League men were retreating into the entrance of a big airlock set in the crater floor beside the great window. An airlock that he knew must give entrance into the lunar cavern beneath that held Blaine's laboratory.

With a fierce rush, the pirates swept on. Men among them fell by dozens from the bursting shells of the enemy's guns. But they were firing back as they charged, using their atom-pistols with deadly effect as they ran. Old Stilicho was shooting with two weapons, his faded eyes burning inside his glassite helmet with fierce battle-light. "They've jammed the airlock!" Thorn yelled. "At them!"

The retreating League soldiers could not all pass through the airlock quickly enough. Down among those who were congested at its entrance swept Thorn and his wild followers.

The League men, hopelessly outnumbered, refused to surrender. Only when all lay dead could Thorn and his party advance through the door of the airlock, which led downward.

They poured into it, forcing open the inner door. Air whistled out past them, and from the blue-lit depths below atom-shells whizzed up at them. But they pressed savagely on, down the ramp below the airlock, down into the vast and gloomy lunar cavern.

CHAPTER XXII

Blaine's Weapon

THE cavern into which the Planeteers and their companions had fought their way was of huge dimen-

sions, a thousand feet across and two hundred in height. It was illuminated by krypton lamps and by the flood of brilliant sunlight that poured in through the big glassite window in the rocky ceiling.

At the center of the cavern, under that window, loomed a colossal and unfamiliar mechanism. It was a great, gleaming chromaloy sphere, supported by girders above a massed complexity of power-chambers and generators. Everything else in the cavern was dwarfed by that towering, gleaming globe.

The space-suited League soldiers, both those who had retreated from outside and those in the cavern who had hastily donned their suits, were firing savagely at their attackers.

Thorn tried to keep Lana behind him as he advanced with Gunner and Sual Av at the head of the pirates, his atom-pistol hot in his gloved hand from firing.

"Gun them all down!" old Stilicho's shrill voice was crying from his suit-audio.

"John, look—they're destroying the machine, over there!" Sual Av yelled, wildly pointing.

Thorn glimpsed where the Venusian pointed, far on the other side of the colossal mechanism. A little group of space-suited men there were firing into Blaine's huge machine with their atom-pistols, endeavoring to destroy its generators.

"Forward!" Thorn shouted. "We've got to stop them."

They rushed forward. And ahead of them bounded the space-dog, Ool, great-fanged jaws yawning wide!

Reckless of their own lives, maddened with apprehension, the Planeteers shot their way forward through the disorganized mob of League defenders.

With Lana Cain now close behind

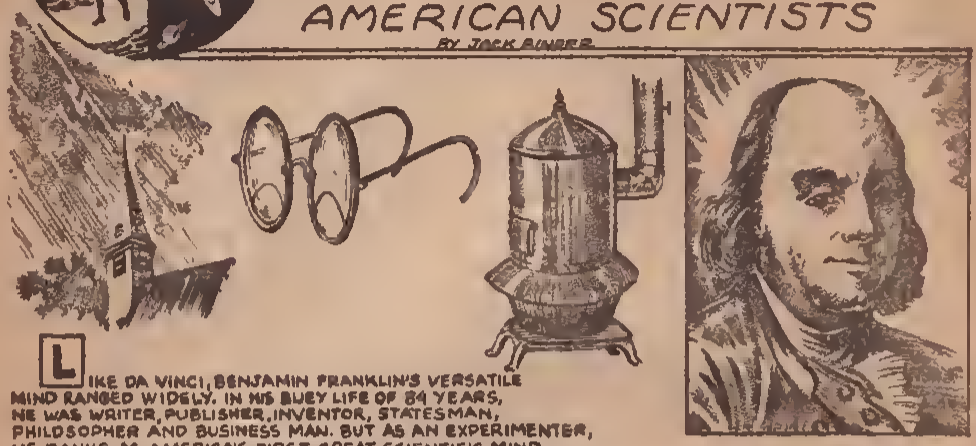
(Continued on page 120)

Next Issue: WHEN NEW YORK VANISHED, a Book-Length Novel of the Missing Metropolis, By HENRY KUTTNER

THE LIFE STORY OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

— THE FIRST OF — AMERICAN SCIENTISTS

BY JACK PINER



LIKE DA VINCI, BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S VERSATILE MIND RANGED WIDELY. IN HIS BUSY LIFE OF 84 YEARS, HE WAS WRITER, PUBLISHER, INVENTOR, STATESMAN, PHILOSOPHER AND BUSINESS MAN. BUT AS AN EXPERIMENTER, HE RANKS AS AMERICA'S FIRST GREAT SCIENTIFIC MIND. INVENTOR OF THE LIGHTNING ROD, BIFOCAL GLASSES, AND THE MODERN STOVE, FRANKLIN APPLIED SCIENTIFIC PRINCIPLES A CENTURY AHEAD OF TIME, IN A LAND THAT HAD BARELY EMERGED FROM PIONEERING DAYS!

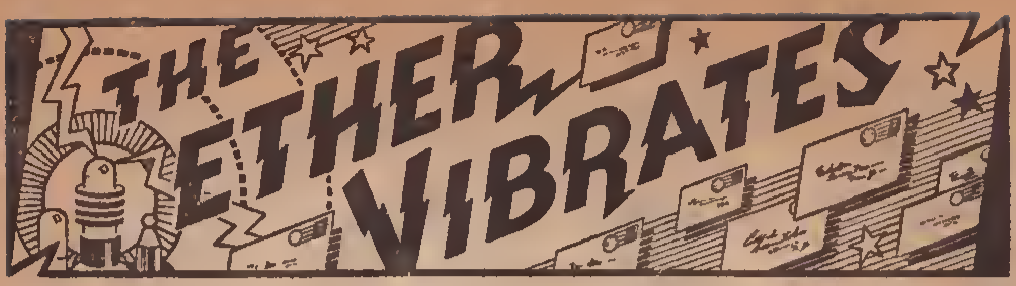
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
(1706-1790)

FRANKLIN'S KEEN MIND DISPLAYED ITSELF IN EARLY YOUTH. AT SIXTEEN, HE WAS WRITING ARTICLES WHICH HIS BROTHER PUBLISHED, UNAWARE OF THE REAL AUTHOR'S IDENTITY. YOUNG BEN SLIPPED THEM UNDER THE DOOR, REMAINING ANONYMOUS. FIFTEEN THOUSAND PIECES OF FRANKLIN'S WRITINGS ARE KNOWN TODAY, THE RESULT OF 60 YEARS' WORK. HIS FAMOUS "POOR RICHARD'S ALMANAC" IS A CLASSIC OF AMERICAN LITERATURE.

WITHOUT BENEFIT OF SCHOOLING OR LEARNED TEACHERS, FRANKLIN BEGAN DELVING INTO NATURE'S MYSTERIES OUT OF SHEER CURIOSITY. HE WAS THE FIRST TO SUGGEST WHITE CLOTHING FOR COOLNESS; HE EXPLAINED THE ORIGIN OF COAL AND THE AURORA BOREALIS; ADVOCATED PHONETIC SPELLING; DEVISED THEORIES FOR THE FORMATION OF THE PLANETS; AND THE PHENOMENON OF THE GULF STREAM. WALKING IN THE COUNTRY, HE WOULD SPREAD OIL OVER CHOPPY PONDS AND RIVERS, QUIETING THEM, AND DRAW CONCLUSIONS ABOUT MOLECULAR SURFACES IN ADVANCE OF THE SCIENCE OF THAT TIME.

Next Issue: The Life-Story of

SIR ISAAC NEWTON, Philosopher of Science



ONE of the most popular authors of fantasy fiction presents a full book-length novel in the next issue of STARTLING STORIES. The writer is Henry Kuttner, creator of the famous "Hollywood-on-the-Moon" series. And his novel WHEN NEW YORK VANISHED, is a gripping narrative of a missing metropolis.

The unknown forces of an unseen race isolate New York City from the rest of the continent—and the twenty-first century's greatest city disappears from the face of the Earth!

We'll predict that you will find WHEN NEW YORK VANISHED the fantasy feast of the year!

Other Coming Events

The name Bob Olsen conjures up many pleasant memories to the veteran science fiction follower. Bob Olsen, long a favorite with fantasy fans, has been nominated for representation in the HALL OF FAME for the next issue. The story? It's THE PHANTOM TELEVIEW, an unforgettable little yarn of a miracle invention.

Because of the unusual length of this month's great novel, THE THREE PLANETEERS, we have devoted most of thia number to its publication—but ALL our regular features and departments will appear next issue. THRILLS IN SCIENCE will hring you unusual anecdotes from the lives of the astronomer, John Couch Adams; the physicist, Jean Baptiate Perrin—and others. Look forward to a new Scientific Crossword Puzzle, a guest editorial by Manly Wade Wellman and other special treats.

Cover contest reaults in the next issue! The response to our cover contest has been more than gratifying, with thousands of readers participating. The winning letter, plus a full list of leading contenders, will be puhlished.

T.W.S. Now Monthly

Incidentally, THRILLING WONDER STORIES is puhlished on a monthly basis now—with twelve great issues a year! You'll like the current January issue, which features Manly Wade Wellman'a novel of the stone age, DAY OF THE CONQUERORS. Novelets and short stories hy your favorite authors in every issue, plus the finest scientific features and departments in the field!

The Big News

And now for the hig news! We announce —scientifiction's newest and most scintillating magazine, CAPTAIN FUTURE! Here, for the first time in fantasy literature, is a complete book-length magazine devoted exclusively to the regular exploits of the most colorful planeteer in the Solar Syatem—Captain Future! CAPTAIN FUTURE AND THE SPACE EMPEROR ia the featured novel in the first issue, and it's written by Edmond Hamilton, author of THE THREE PLANETEERS.

We know you'll like this latest addition to our scientifiction family! Naturally, we'd appreciate hearing your opinion of it. Here's hoping we get a letter or postcard from each and every reader. Thank you!

—THE EDITOR.

LETTERS FROM READERS

THE ETHER VIBRATES—with the letters sent in by loyal followers of science fiction. Add your voice! This department is a public forum devoted to your opinions, suggestions and comments—and we're anxious to hear from you. Remember, this is YOUR magazine and is planned to fulfill all your requirements. Let as know which stories and departments you like—and which fall to click with you. A knock's as welcome as a boost—speak right up and we'll print as many of your letters as possible. We cannot undertake to enter into private correspondence. Address THE ETHER VIBRATES, STARTLING STORIES, 22 West 48th St., New York, N. Y.

FINLAY FAN

By Willard E. Dewey

"The Fortress of Utopia," by Jack Williamson, in the latest STARTLING STORIES is very good. I was somewhat disappointed with the illustrations for it though. With all of the excellent descriptions to choose from, some of the most drab scenes of the story are portrayed by Wesso. Finlay has done the best job yet of illustrating for S.S. His drawings for Eando Binder's excellent novel were superb Let's have more Finlay. Also, more Jack Binder.

Congrstulations upon completing a full year. Five good novels out of a possible six

is not bad at all

Departments and short stories are good, as usual. By all means do print Weinbaum's "Valley of Dreams," sequel to "A Martian Odyssey."—1005 Charles St., Everett, Washington.

WEINBAUM SEQUEL COMING!

By W. C. Pelham

Allow me to add my voice to the thousands who doubtless have already written to you, urging you to reprint in your HALL OF FAME department Stanley G. Weinbaum's "The Valley of Dreams," which some of us found even better than his "A Martian Odyssey." Those contacted here in Baltimore have without exception expressed their satisfaction and delight at once again reading this classic. —2225 Pennsylvania Ave., Baltimore, Md.

By Gordon L. Springer

I appreciate very much your reprinting of Weinbaum's "Martian Odyssey," and I hope you will publish its sequel "The Valley of Dreams."—No. 441, Y.M.C.A., Seattle, Wash.

NOVELS CLICK

By Thomas S. Gardner

The September STARTLING STORIES was very good. It had an excellent cover, quite intriguing. "The Bridge to Earth" was one of the best novels I've seen in a long time. STARTLING STORIES has certainly clicked on the novels—the only one I haven't liked was "Giants From Eternity."

Williams' story had a human touch to it that was appealing. We could do with a good sequel to it. "Cosmic Stage" was a fair short, but nothing extraordinary. "The Misty Wilderness" was good; I enjoyed the scientale.

The departments of S.S. are the best of any scientifiction magazine out. In fact, I believe the departments help to make the magazine an A-1 presentation, ranking high up with the leaders in the field.—P. O. Box No. 802, Kingsport, Tenn.

DEPARTMENT DEVOTEE

By Loretta Beasley

Your stories in the November issue of STARTLING STORIES are good, and I liked them. But this letter is about your departments.

"Meet the Author" is o.k., and intsresting, but I would like to know more about the author, and less about how he came to think of his plot.

The Guest Editorial by Ralph Milne Farley was well written, brief and had a real idea in it. It made me stop and think; so many editorials and articles are just a rehash of old ideas and arguments.

THRILLS IN SCIENCE is unique. No other mag has anything like it, and the writing, by Mort Weisinger, has real craftsmanship.

I especially like the SCIENCE QUESTION BOX, but I wish you would publish it in smaller type so that we could have more material in it; every now and then you print a question I've always wanted answered and never could find out about.

THE ETHER VIBRATES is perfect, in my estimation. Please leave it as it is, and don't print letters a mile long from some fans, because they take up too much room. Here's where I put in a good word for the SCIENTIFIC CROSSWORD PUZZLE. I love to do them and they are hard to find, being practically as scarce as hen's teeth. The puzzle is neither too hard nor too easy, and takes me half an hour to solve.

I have, however, one large-sized squawk, and here it is: In "Review of the Science Fiction Fan Magazines," why not tell how much each mag costs? For instance if I want to send for one, I'm at a loss. (Sample issues of fan magazines are complimentary.—Ed.)

Now all these remarks are just one woman's opinions, so maybe the rest of your readers won't agree if this letter is published.

Anyhow, I'm still enthusiastic about your magazine, and long may it appear on the newsstands.—Lyndon, Kansas.

HAMILTON TOPS

By Alan Saun

"The Bridge to Earth," by Robert Moore Williams, in the September, 1939, issue of STARTLING STORIES, was a marvelously written story by an author who is fast becoming one of my favorites. One of the reasons why I enjoyed the novel immensely was because it was a subatomic yarn—my favorite type of science fiction story.

The first few HALL OF FAME stories were familiar to me. But the fifth one was new. And I was glad to read "The Space Visitors," by Edmond Hamilton. I'll never forget the tremendous enjoyment I received while reading that outstanding story. Hamilton possesses a truly magnificent imagination. Nowadays the majority of scientifiction stories we read are quickly forgotten. Hamilton's masterpiece was certainly not among those. His was a story that made you think after finishing it. Edmond Hamilton is my favorite fantasy author. Very few readers will deny that Hamilton's "The Prisoner of Mars," in the May issue, was one of the greatest stories ever written.

How about getting those great artists, Alex Schomburg and Marchioni to illustrate future issues? Wesso, incidentally, is very good. —Toronto, Ontario.

"UTOPIA" PERFECT

By E. Earl Bielfeldt

I have just finished reading the November issue of STARTLING STORIES. It's a "corker," as they say. "The Fortress of Utopia" was one of Jack Williamson's best, if not the best, that I have ever read. One can always depend upon that versatile fellow to turn out a bang-up story, though. It really had a surprise ending. Every one of Williamson's stories is so different that one wonders where he gets so many ideas. Usually, a writer will pick out a style and theme and run it into the ground but not Jack Williamson. Here's hoping he never runs out of ideas and words.

The Weinbaum masterpiece, "A Martian Odyssey," was really a treat. I had never read it, and was wondering if I ever would, when along came S.S. with it in The Hall of Fame. That feature is the best in the magazine. To be sure, publish "The Valley of Dreams." If it is a sequel to this one, I'm sure that everyone will want to read it.

"Three Wise Men" was cleverly worked out. I was really surprised at the hoax. The three were pitiful—after the disclosure of the trick. This was a different type of story.

"They Changed the World," by Jack Binder, is a very informative feature. It is even better than "If" in T.W.S. These two features are the best things that Binder does. His work is of a variable nature, sometimes good and sometimes bad. Never very bad, though.

I could go on and on, but I don't want to be tiresome, so I'll close with best wishes. —Maple and Cherry Lanes, Thornton, Ill.

BLASTING THE EDITOR

By Langley Searles

Though I haven't yet found time to read the latest issues of T.W.S., STARTLING STORIES or STRANGE STORIES, I still have enough material to fill a letter to you with.

First, I want to compliment you on obtaining artist Finlay, and compliment Finlay on the magnificent double-page illustration for "The Citadel of Darkness" in the August STRANGE STORIES. And also for the second illustration to Taine's novelette in your Anniversary Number. In my opinion, Finlay does his best work for your magazines. I'd like to see more of his work.

While on the subject of artists, how about bringing back Dold to s-f? Like Finlay, he puts atmosphere into his drawings; often I get the impression of pure crystallized action —like a suddenly-snapped photograph—when I view some of his work. Some said that he deteriorated in '38 and '39, but I rather think that he simply was not given stories to illustrate that would properly show his individual, refined technique to the best advantage. I have followed his work since '31, and have always rated his artistic criterion high.

Retain Schomburg; his work seems to be meticulously up to standard the majority of the time. However, I suggest that you give Marchioni a friendly slap on the back and send him packing off—where he goes is immaterial, as long as he keeps away from here.

In the November STARTLING STORIES Williamson's novel looks promising, although I haven't started it yet. The cover shows up well and the only fault I can find with it is that you forgot to remove the "Ark of Space's" price-tag—it's still sticking on her nose. Well, you're forgiven this time. After experimenting with color combinations on the magazine's backbone, why not adopt one for uniformity's sake? Personally, I prefer the one on the latest issue (I think it shows up the best) but any one will suit yours truly, if you stick to it regularly.

I got to thinking the other day. I do little correspondence with fellow fans, but almost without exception—when I do, that is—the fans mention in their reminiscences something like this: "Say, remember the readers' columns in the old Wonder?" or: "Now take the old Wonder Stories; they had a readers' department to be proud of!" And so on. And I thought—and still do think—that you could have the best readers' section in s-f right now. Why not? Of course you can't supply the columns' material; that's up to the readers. But a little careful choosing of the letters printed, a little paragraph from the editor after each letter—all that would help attain the goal. Little things like that all add up, you know, and personal touches aid in building up a friendly atmosphere of **camaraderie** among the fans. More important, it brings the editor closer to them, which also goes a long way. A couple of years ago a fan suggested that you cut down the type-size of "The Reader Speaks." You did. He also asked you to concentrate on making it a real department. Whether or not you put conscious effort into doing that or no, I've no idea; but I do know that since then I think it's a better department. Now it's up to you again: how about editorial answers to the published letters?—19 East 235th St., New York City.

(No, the editor isn't a sphinx. Comments to readers' letters are always appended when the published letter calls for a reply. We won't comment on a letter for comment's sake. The other vibrates with the opinions of the readers—not the editor. And, quite often, a short answer to a note would be inadequate. A long reply would be unfair to the readers for whom this department is intended. At any rate, we'll talk when we have something to say—either here, or in our editorials!—Ed.)

GENIUS

By R. Bayless

I have followed science fiction for a number of years now with the result that I can, I believe, compare the trends of this type of writing with some degree of safety. Your magazine has attempted to create a new form that has been long anticipated and needed, that of raising the ethical tone of the stories to a considerably more mature (if I may use the word) level. This is an extreme advance over your predecessors and undoubtedly a very welcome one.

We readers have been fed material that, if not for its savagery, would be absolutely childish and completely lacking in any taste and discrimination whatsoever, and yet the fault was not of the editor wholly, for he was giving the public nothing more than they wished. In presenting dwellers upon other planets as beings with a reasonably developed ethics, and not as the usual malignant monstera intent upon nothing but murder and ruin, you have raised science fiction from the customary ten-year-old level to a state that deserves praise.

There is one thing that still smacks of the comic-section, however, and that is reflected in the hero of your stories, for a hero under seven feet without blond hair is apparently unthinkable.

There is one more grievance that needs airing, that of the rather novel and promiscuous use of the word genius. Apparently, science-fiction writers have never comprehended the fact that a culture is indicated, probably, more by its artists, musicians, poets and writers than by its scientists. At least as great an indication as its science, if the last sentence is too strong, though I would never place a great scientist, with due regards for his importance, in a class with Beethoven or Rembrandt.

A genius, according to such tales, need only have a good deal of mathematical-mechanical ability and if he should be so lucky as to work in an underground laboratory and he acid-stained, then his genius is undeniable. Some day, perhaps, such writers will become aware of the fact that scientists are of the utmost importance, undoubtedly, but that when placed by the titanic figure of Beethoven, they must, of necessity, dwindle to relative invisibility, or compared to the flaming genius of Shelley, be hidden.

The scientists probe the Universe for knowledge and do a most worthy job, but the mighty genius of the arts needs no such tools, or scratchings, for he is absorbed in the very flow of the universe and experiences the passions of reality.

In spite of my criticisms, your advance is truly praiseworthy and I am hopeful that you will continue in such improvements.—1146 S. Orlando Ave., Los Angeles, Calif.

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SCIENCE Question BOX

WATER IN THE SUN

Editor, SCIENCE QUESTION BOX:

Is there any water in the sun? That may sound like a foolish question, but the spectroscope tells us that oxygen and hydrogen exist in the solar orb. So why not water, too?—G. H. W., Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Scientists are quite certain that there is no water in the sun. True, oxygen and hydrogen, both components of water, exist in the sun, as they do on Earth. And also, inasmuch as both gases have a tremendously strong affinity for each other to combine and form water, your question has some grounds.

But there can be no water in the sun because the sun is so incredibly hot that none of the elements, not even oxygen and hydrogen, can combine there. As a matter of fact, by producing intense heat science can separate hydrogen and oxygen of water apart. That is exactly what happens in the sun; or, rather, the sun has never been cool enough to allow them to come together, and so there can be no water produced.—Ed.

WEIGHT OF THE ATMOSPHERE

Editor, SCIENCE QUESTION BOX:

Is there any way of determining the weight of our atmosphere? If so, what is its weight?—J. C., Washington, D. C.

The pressure of the atmosphere at sea level averages about 14.7 pounds to the square inch, which corresponds to a reading of 29.92 inches of the barometer. The density and pressure of the air decrease rapidly as we ascend. At an altitude of 3.6 miles above sea level they are reduced one half. The atmosphere extends, however, many hundreds of miles above the earth, becoming rarer and rarer with increase of altitude.

Above six miles, as we know, it is too rare to support life. Still higher it becomes more tenuous than the best "vacuum" we can attain with an air-pump. The total weight of the atmosphere, it is calculated from these premises, is about 5,633,000,000,000,000 tons.—Ed.

THE LAWS OF CHANCE

Editor, SCIENCE QUESTION BOX:

A few years ago I read a science fiction story, "The Circle of Zero," by Stanley G. Weinbaum, which I believe was published in your companion magazine, THRILLING WONDER STORIES. The story, as part of its theme, discussed the laws of chance. In connection with this, can you enlighten me on one point concerning the laws of chance? Let us suppose I've tossed a coin ten times, and each time the coin showed up with heads. Now, the next toss, the eleventh, should be tails, for it seems extremely unlikely that the heads streak will continue. But isn't the chance that heads will turn up again equally possible? How do the laws of chance operate in this case?—M. K., Beaver Dam, Wisconsin.

Good work! You're quite right in your surmise. Bertrand, the French mathematician, illustrates your point with the observation that the coin has neither memory nor consciousness. The coin is an inorganic, inanimate object, and the motivation guiding the fact whether heads or tails shows up is due to its actual physical construction, and not to any predetermination on the part of the coin. On each and every chance there is always the same probability that heads or tails will turn up. Whether you're betting on what turns up after the coin has showed up with the same surface for several consecutive times has nothing whatever to do with the following toss.

In his book, "Science Examines the Laws of Chance," Dr. Horace C. Levinson reminds us that it is not true that "in the long run there ought to be as many heads as tails." The correct statement is: in the long run we expect the proportion of heads and that of tails to be approximately equal. The proportion of heads means the number of heads divided by the total number of tosses; if the coin is tossed one thousand times, and there are 547 heads, the proportion of heads is 547 ÷ 1,000, or 547/1,000, while in this same series the proportion of tails is 453/1,000.—Ed.

In this department the editors of STARTLING STORIES will endeavor to answer your questions on modern scientific facts. Please do not submit more than three questions in your letter. As many questions as possible will be answered here, but the editors cannot undertake any personal correspondence. Naturally, questions of general interest will be given the preference. Address your questions to SCIENCE QUESTION BOX, STARTLING STORIES, 22 West 48th Street, New York City.

MIND OVER MATTER

The Men From Mars Were Freaks—But They Were More Than Human!

By OSCAR J. FRIEND

Author of "Coup d'Etat," "Robot A-1," etc.

ZENTOR, instructor in astronomy and mathematics, faced his class, his faintly lavender aura pulsing like a corona about his tall and pallid form. His large, bulging eyes flashed a benign glance as a student's tentaclelike little arm rose in salute.

"Your lesson, Taurel," Zentor ordered.

The Martian student's dead-white little body pulsed bravely with its faint aura as the child put forth his concentrated mental reply. All of the other students glowed in pale luminence as they put themselves in receptive state to receive his thought emanations.

"Yes, sir," communicated Taurel. "Helios turns toward the east. Due to its gaseous nature, it does not rotate as a solid body, the regions nearer its poles moving more slowly."

The little student's pulsing aura subsided, and the professor glowed his approval.

"Excellent, my little man. Now, who can name the inferior planets, giving their diameters and mass?"

Another tentacular little arm went up, and Zentor signaled permission to broadcast.

"There are nine planets in the family of Helios," came the pulsing reply. "The—"

A voice exploded in her brain

It was a queer classroom, this. The pupils, seated in orderly rows facing the tall form of their instructor, had neither books, desks, nor other tangible trappings of educational ad-

juncts. Hairless, pallid of countenance, bulging of eye, arms terminating in three fingers, they looked more like slugs than children of men. And about each, like a delicate cloak of shimmering light, pulsed a visible aura.

Zentor, in full maturity, stood a good eight feet tall. Otherwise, he was a larger specimen of the same order as the little tots before him. And little tots they were, not a one of them being more than six Earthly years of age.

A panel in one wall slid noiselessly open, and a second, tall man entered the chamber. His aura pulsed out brilliantly as he transmitted an urgent message to Zentor.

"You are wanted at home, Professor. Your wife just televised. The mentor of the museum is waiting."

Zentor's aura paled, then pulsed an angry red.

"Thank you, Laktos. Will you take the class?"

Zentor hastened out in the shuffling walk peculiar to these people. His substitute pulsed sympathetically. Alas, poor Zentor was pitied by all who knew of his affliction. He was the father of twin monstrosities. Phobos and Delmos, named for the moons of Ares, were sports—atavistic throwbacks to a dim and distant past.

Now nearly eight years of age, the twin sons of Zentor were physical monstrosities. Born with five fingers on each hand, five toes on each foot, even their color was the pale green of the ancient dwellers of the outer world. They were freaks. Nothing remotely resembling them had been born on Ares in more than a hundred thousand years.

Zentor bitterly contemplated all this as he entered his gravi-slide, gripped the long rod at the right of the pilot's stool, and let a detached portion of his brain activate the bank of machinery behind him. The perpendicular rod, similar in construction to the emergency brake of a motor car, was not unlike the joy-stick of an early airplane. Its function, however, was vastly different. It was the thought-energizer.

Inhabiting the underground, men of Ares had gone far beyond atomic power and electro-magnetics. The boilerlike machine behind Zentor, with its rows and banks of condensers, came to life with a silent ease that was uncanny. Zentor was driving his queer sled by sheer mental force. Operating the two simple pad pedals beneath his rudimentary feet, he steered the gravi-slide out into the orderly flow of traffic.

For nearly eight years Zentor had fought against the inevitability of this hour. Shocked and aghast at the birth of the twin monstrosities he had unwittingly sired, he had been at a loss to account for their weird appearance until he had searched through volumes of ancient records. Relief at finding they were not alien forms was submerged in the shocking fact that they were atavisms reaching back two hundred thousand years.

The only comfort in the entire tragedy was the fact that their minds were brilliant. It was as if Nature were trying to compensate in gray matter for the terrible affliction she had imposed physically.

IN the vaulted dome of his library Zentor found the mentor of the great museum of Ares and a committee of four members awaiting him. Standing respectfully in the presence of their elders, clad in their specially tailored garments of blue metal cloth, their outlandish feet encased in pliable metal boots the like of which had not trod the ground of Ares in two hundred thousand years, stood Delmos and Phobos.

"Ah, Zentor!" the mentor communicated. "You will have to accede to the orders of the Supreme Council. Here is the authority to take your monstrous progeny into custody and place them in the museum for the education and edification of the race."

He held forth in one undulating tentacular hand a thin metal scroll embossed with the seal of the Supreme Council.

"I knew you would never rest, Malees, until you succeeded in tearing my sons from me," flashed back Zentor as his great eyes read the order. "And you have still failed. Before I

will let my sons be placed on exhibition like—like freaks, I will appeal to the Council in person."

Malees gave the equivalent of a shrug.

Zentor's wife came forward and placed a tentacle on her husband's shoulder.

"Oh, Zentor," she communicated sorrowfully, "must our own flesh and blood—be exhibited to the common public gaze like—like the fossil skeleton of the Wau-wau, the chained and caged specimens of the prehistoric Sauk?"

"Not while I live!" flamed Zentor. "Malees, you and your precious committee get out! Leave my dwelling!"

"You mean you will disobey the order of the Council?" Malees was incredulous.

"Father," the aura of Phobos pulsed in lavender beauty. "Loath as Deimos and I are to submit to such treatment, you must not incur the displeasure of the Council. We will submit to the command."

"Why must you?" Zentor flashed back. "What crime are you guilty of, my sons? Only that you have been born with obsolete bodies. Your brains are the equal, nay, superior to others of your age. It would break your mother's heart for you to be placed on exhibition like common—"

"After all," Deimos flashed, gesticulating at his brother and himself with slender green hands, "we are freaks. If we can advance science, if we can entertain the people of Ares by a shameless exhibition of our bodies—"

"No, no!" pulsed their mother. "I can't bear the thought."

"Wait!" communicated Zentor. "I will appeal to the Council first. I am not disobeying, Malees; I am claiming the right of intercession. Now, be off!"

THEIR auras pulsing all colors of the rainbow, the mentor and his committee withdrew. The two unfortunate lads and their mother turned anxiously to the frantic Zentor.

"I must think! I must think!" he flashed to them in agony. "Rather death than the pitiless exposure to all of Ares. And for what? Simply because you are physical throwbacks. Ah, the cruelty of evolution."

"Isn't there some place we can go, Father?" asked Phobos, speaking aloud as well as thinking his query. The sound made them all jump, so unaccustomed were they to audible speech.

"Two hundred thousand years behind us in physical evolution," pondered Zentor bleakly. "And that makes you freaks!"

"Some place to go," repeated Deimos, looking at his brother. "Hasn't astronomy taught us anything? Hasn't it shown us a place of refuge? Are you afraid to risk the death of an explorer, Phobos?"

Suddenly, Zentor's aura pulsed brightly.

"I have it! I have it—thanks to you boys!" he flashed. "Attend me. Ancient astronomers spent much time studying the heavens. A forgotten fact that I uncovered in seeking an explanation of your bodies comes to mind. Life is not peculiar to Ares. Upon the next inferior planet of our Solar System—Terra—there is life of the same general classification as ours. Terra, having a race that is startlingly similar to ours, should just now be at the approximate stage of evolution which your two bodies represent. There, on Terra, you would be supermen!"

"But—but, how would they get there?" demanded the mother helplessly.

"The gravi-slide!" exclaimed Deimos, his brilliant young mind following his father's thought.

"A transparent plastic shell about it would protect us from the airless cold of the void!" flashed Phobos enthusiastically. "With the mental energy of both of us to activate it, a two-seated gravi-slide will be ample to essay the voyage."

"It is possible!" flashed Zentor. "There are many details to work out, but it can be done."

"Oh, my poor sons!" mourned the mother. "Victims of a terrible accident. Zentor, I cannot let them attempt—"

"Better that than a life in a freak

museum," reminded Zentor. "However, the choice is theirs."

"We choose Terra!" flashed the monstrous twins together. "Let us make ready. . . ."

EARTH was mad! Upon that beautiful, cloud-mantled, verdant globe spinning gracefully through the majestic void at a mean distance of 92,900,000 miles from the sun there was war—holocaust! That devastating spark touched off by the Second World War of 1939 had been the final catastrophe. Nation was battling against nation indiscriminately. Vast armies and navies and air forces were marching and steaming and flying eagerly to their rendezvous at Armageddon. The fury and hatred of mankind blazed to the greatest and most consuming height in history.

Then, out of the western sky, flashing like a meteor through the stratosphere, came a queer machine. It looked like a glorified bob-sled. Upon two pedestal stools in the very front of the aerial sled sat a pair of the strangest creatures ever to appear in man's form on or above Earth. And the entire contraption was encased in a transparent shell of what looked like fused quartz.

Alien, fearsome, terrifying and awe-inspiring, this bizarre craft with its more grotesque passengers swept across the sky. But there was no one to give the alarm, to peer through the mighty telescopes and warn the world of alien invasion. Man was busy at more important things. He was butchering his fellowmen and destroying such things as telescopes and observatories and industrial centers.

Phobos and Deimos, exhausted and weary from their miraculous flight across the void, their great, hulging green heads fairly aching from the terrific mental strain of their interplanetary journey, were conscious of a withering blast of hatred which smote their senses in an almost overpowering wave before they had plunged their craft through the obscuring clouds.

"Deimos," pulsed Phobos, who was operating the dual controls while his brother relaxed heside him, "take your energizer quickly! I—I need assistance. We've struck a mental vortex."

But Deimos was already reaching out for his control rod, his feet already on the foot treadles aiding his twin in managing the mentally driven craft.

"By the Infinite Creator, Phobos!" he communicated. "What hellish emanation is this?"

"Mass hatred," flared Deimos. "No one or even a dozen mentalities could generate this awful power."

For a space the two brothers were silent as they guided their gravi-slide down through the chaos of poisoned thought waves and received their first glimpse of Terra. Two great rows of portholes in the floor of their sled began to glow, shooting out the pale green rays of gravitation nullifiers. Like a great albatross the aerial sled glided smoothly along in a sweeping rush at the rate of five or six hundred miles per hour.

Now, for the first time, the rush of

[*Turn page*]

air became audible to their large and pointed green ears. Tbey were speeding across Central Europe—although they did not yet know lt hy that name—and the terrihle concussion of gunfire quivered against their delicately receptive eardrums.

"Mankind is mad!" Phobos communicated to his brother. "Explosives! Antlque aircraft! Look, brother, a fleet of ten are circling to—to ettsck us!"

DEIMOS' only answer for the moment was an increasing glow of his sura as he expended his mental energy to throw a protective shleld ahout the grevi-slide. The *rat-tat-tat* of mschine-gun fire broke upon their ears. The mushrooming clouds of the bursting shells of anti-aircraft guns blossomed around them. But they swept, unscathed, through shot and shell snd angrily attacking plenes.

"Primitive weapons!" communicated Deimos. "Men of Terra haven't even yet discovered atomlc power, s simple force whlch we of Ares dlscarded a hundred tbousand years sgo."

"True. What do you suggest we do, brother? We can't encircle this globe ln this fashion for eternlty. We must land and replenish our supplies. You reslize whst happens to men of Ares who burn up their mental capacity without pausing to rest and rebuild and replenish."

"Thelr mlnds blank out—burn up llke dynamos," Deimos pulsed ln reply. "Remember Cronos, the presldent of the Supreme Council? He drove himself without cessation for thirty days in his battle with the forces of the suhterranean worm people."

"He became as a child again," communicated Phohos in reply. "He gave his mind for his country."

"And we have been nearly thirty days making this spatisl voysge," polnted out Deimos.

"But there hsve been two of us, relieving eacb other. And we hsve taken turns ingesting nutriment and resting. I say, let us explore this globe and find a more suitable spot for lsnding. Let us get out of this maelstrom of hate emanation. It is making me wesry and lll. Here! Surrender the entire control to me and relax."

Gratefully, Deimos obeyed. He relaxed on his stool and reeched hehind him for the door of a little cabinet as his twin gripped his own energizing rod tighter, snd bis aura flamed out ln miniature rivalry of the corona of Helios. Tbe gravi-slide accelerated in a bresthless swoop which shot them across the battlefields of France and over the Pyrenees to glide above the war-torn reaches of Spaln.

From the csblnet Deimos extracted a crystal vial of concentrated glandular tablets and placed two of the pellets in his mouth, permitting them to dissolve like sour balls before he slowly chewsd up the fragments wlth the hardened ridges in the front of his mouth which were the vestlglal remains of Martian teetb.

His aura slowly brlghtened as his system asslmilated the vital nourishment. From the ground below thought waves still bombarded the twins, hut there was sn underlying note of misery and despair in the blanket of mental emanations that tore at thsir heartstrlngs.

"Phobos, this planet is sick," Deimos communicated. "Let us span its continents and study the inhabltants. If we stay out of war zones, we can devote one lobe of our brains to research. Perhaps we will be ahle to sid these sufferlng men of Terra."

"Agreed," promptly pulsed his hrother.

FOR forty-elght hours the huge grsvi-slide slipped through the sky faster than a projectile, winding its path around and around the spinning globe of mankind while the two pilots received the mingled thought impulses of men and prohed and sought. Gradually a comprehensive picture of the missrable sufferings snd struggles of humanity came to them.

It was when they wsre passing above the devastated area of bleeding Chins that the twins resched a momentous declsion.

"Look, Deimos!" pulsed Phobos. "Yellow men—more nearly like us than any other of the confusing races of Terra. And all of thsm weary of war and dylng of bltter hatred of their

fellows."

"Yes," communicated Deimos. "I have looked. I have listened. Phobos, are you afraid to become—like Cronos?"

"You mean?" questioned Phobos, but he already knew what his brother was thinking.

"I mean that we could concentrate our thought emanations and combat the hate thoughts of Terra with brotherly love and benevolence. Perhaps we could blot out all hatred and greed and intolerance within the soul of mankind—if we gave all. While our poor bodies are only a few hundred thousand years in advance of men of Terra, our minds are half a million years beyond them."

"Ah!" communicated Phobos softly. "Perhaps our combined efforts, supplemented by the machinery of the gravi-slide, might beat down through the puny consciousness of terrestrials and obliterate their baseness. A noble experiment, brother. But can we succeed against the combined mass thought of teeming millions?"

"We can try," pulsed Deimos.

Phobos looked d o w n. He had learned to love the celestial beauty of the sky, the clouds, the blue mountains, the green-clad hills, the sparkling blue of lakes and rivers, the wind, the birds—everything of beauty about this sister world to Ares—everything of joy and ecstasy that barren Ares had not.

"A wonderful planet," he murmured aloud. "A world worth living for. And men are laying it waste, dying for it—and never gaining it. We *will* try, Deimos!"

For seven days and nights the huge gravi-slide from outer space circled with the sun about the spinning globe of Terra. From the incredible height of twenty miles the pale green cones of light from the two rows of portholes increased in intensity and spread fanwise across the surface of the Earth.

And a miracle happened. War suddenly ceased to exist. Soldiers threw down their weapons and ran forward to laugh and cry and embrace their enemies. Strong men bent to perform all sorts of acts of kindness. Mankind, stunned at his own former savagery, set about rebuilding a tottering civilization. A new era, a new millennium was dawning.

THE end of their spiraling journey, the seventh day, brought Phobos and Deimos northward across the mighty Pacific Ocean and across an isthmus of land where an ingenious system of locks and canals wedded two mighty bodies of water. The Panama Canal!

Locked in battle for possession of this powerful waterway two great armies were fighting — yellow men from the Orient and khaki-clad white men from t h e United States of America.

The week had wrought a terrible change in the twins. Gaunt to the point of emaciation, faces drawn and withered, their auras pulsing weakly with a sickish mauve hue, they directed their sled heavily, sluggishly. Two days ago they had ingested the last of their concentrated food. They had exhausted every possible bit of substance and supply. They were burning up their brilliant mentalities.

"Look, Phobos," pulsed Deimos, weakly raising one hand to indicate the scene of carnage below. "One supreme effort we must make. This is the last plague spot."

"And it means our utter annihilation," communicated Phobos.

"Are you afraid to die, my brother?" asked Deimos.

"Not with you at my side," pulsed Phobos. And he directed the gravi-slide lower and across the battlefront so that the weakening rays of benevolent effulgence could bathe the combatants impartially.

Squarely above the flaming holocaust of bursting bombs the gravi-slide swept. American soldiers in units of three on brazen platforms that looked like golden discs looked up in terror and swiveled their ray guns to blank out the approaching nightmare craft.

"The Japs! The Japs!" they cried, and the rays seared like vivid fire through and through the gravi-slide.

So exhausted and drained by their Herculean task were the twins that they no longer could maintain a pro-

tective shield about their craft. But the green rays did their work. And the last men in the world bearing arms threw down their weapons and left their stations, stumbling about in bewilderment.

With a last, almost convulsive effort, Phobos headed the gravi-slide northward and impelled it onward toward the sweeping prairies of Texas. Like a dying meteor, the queer craft flashed over the rim of the horizon, sinking heavily.

It crashed just north of Austin, Texas. There was a vivid flash of light which lit up the prairie for several miles, and then darkness. . . .

"INCREDIBLE! Simply astounding!"

Dr. Frederick Corning removed his stethoscope with trembling fingers. He looked from one to the other of the two bizarre forms stretched out on the pair of hospital cots. He looked around at his circle of assistants.

"I still don't believe it," he declared. "It's impossible!"

The staff, collectively, nodded. When Dr. Corning, the head surgeon of the City Hospital, didn't believe anything, it couldn't be so.

"Where are the men who found these—these monstrosities?" the surgeon went on. "I want to interview them."

The two farmers were quickly brought in.

"Zeb and me had just finished milkin'," explained Lem Thompson, repeating his story, "when we seen a flash of light. Then we heard a kind of crash in the lower pasture. It scared us for a minute. We thought the Japs had come up from Mexico. Then we found these here freaks lyin' hslf in the frog pond. Up on the bank was what was left of some kinda machine they musta had—looked like an engine boiler, and there was a lot of broken glass. It was stili blazin'.

"But these—these things was still breathin', so we loaded 'em in the truck and brought 'em straight to town."

"And you never saw them before?" inquired the surgeon.

"Never even heard o' such crazy-lookin' folks. They're foreigners of some kind."

The doctor turned back to the limp forms on the cots.

"Yes," he said slowly, "they're foreigners—of some kind. And the miracle is that they've lived from birth—not that they survived their accident."

"But, my God, Doctor!" murmured an intern, shuddering. "What manner of things are they?"

"Don't lose your nerve, Hardwick," said the chief of staff. "We will make a thorough examination—if they live. They look like Egyptian mummies—travesties of mummies—but there is, of course, a natural explanation. *Hmmm*—nearly seven feet tall. That is odd. But their color, if it isn't due to the explosion, indicates that a valve of the heart has not closed properly, thus giving them that greenish blue cast. And the bulging cranium—acromegaly, if I ever saw it—indicates an advanced stage of phrenitis which has all but burst the bony structure. The huge and protruding eyeballs show ophthalmic goiter or brain tumors.

"They can't possibly live in this condition, but we'll do the best we can for them."

"Where are we going to keep them—if they live?" inquired an associate physician. "And who will pay for their treatment? Who are they, anyway?"

"That comes later. Our duty now is to alleviate their misery."

Astonishingly enough, Phobos and Deimos survived their disaster. No longer mantled in shining aura of glowing energy, carefully secluded in a private ward, they grew stronger and recuperated—physically. Their minds, too weak and burnt out to send or receive thought transmissions, remained imbecilic. And all during the days of their convalescence a frantic search went on to locate the guardians or institutions from which they had escaped.

John William Prescott solved the problem of their future care. Mr. Prescott was a publicity promoter. Arriving in the van of the swarm of news reporters and newsreel men, he

went out to see the wreck at Thompson's frog pond.

"Yeah, men from space, that's it," he said in reply to the farmer's query. "So you have an option on them—seeing as how you found them on your place. Well, listen, friend, here's how you and I can both become rich. We'll exhibit them as living monstrosities! That wreck yonder as a space ship? Naw! Tbat piece of junk couldn't fly a kite. We'll build them a fake rocket ship—bill them as Castor and Pollux, the heavenly twins. . . ."

THE fat lady from Iowa paused just north of Times Square in front of the "Believe It If You Can" museum and looked at the huge poster as her ears strained to catch the patter of the bull-throated barker.

"Constant and complete show of amazing oddities of the entire world, ladies and gentlemen. Twenty-five cents, and you see the greatest collection of monstrosities in the world. Don't miss Castor and Pollux, the giant boys from Venus. See fragments of their rocket ship picked up in the Texas badlands. Most marvelous exhibit of its kind. . . ."

The lady succumbed. Paying her quarter, she entered the museum particularly to see the twins. For a long moment she stood before the platform where a pair of attenuated green skeletons seven feet tall stared idiotically out over the jostling throng of curious spectators.

"Ridiculous!" snorted the lady from Iowa. "Castor and Pollux, indeed! Mike and Ike is more like it. They're fakes!"

And then she stared violently and looked around in sudden fear. But she knew nobody had spoken. The thought had simply exploded in her brain, spontaneously.

"Not fakes, madam. Freaks!"

The worthy lady, her face white, took one last look and scurried for the exit.

Two pairs of great, bulging eyes followed her retreating form in such idiocy as to haunt her for all the rest of her days.

●

COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE PHANTOM TELEVIEW

A Hall of Fame Story by BOB OLSEN

●

THRILLS IN SCIENCE

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AND MANY OTHER STORIES AND FEATURES

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

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THE THREE PLANETEERS

(Continued from page 105)

them, they forced through to the other side of the gigantic machine.

Thorn recognized the tall, space-sulted figure of the leader of the little group who were trying to destroy the mechanism. The face inside that glassite helmet was the bony green face and insanely raging eyes of Haskell Trask.

"Throw down those guns!" Thorn yelled through his suit-audio. "Surrender!"

"I'll surrender *this* way!" Trask's crazed, harsh voice came back.

The dictator shot at Thorn in the same instant. The little shell flicked past Thorn and exploded behind him —and Lana Cain sank to the floor as the blinding flare touched her side.

Wild with rage, Thorn raised his gun to fire. But Ool was ahead of him. The big space-dog, eyes terrible as it saw its mistress fall, arced through space in a leap straight at Trask.

The huge jaws closed upon the throat of the dictator's space-suit—and tore. The other League men beside Trask shrunk back appalled, raising their hands in surrender.

The battle in the cavern behind the Planeteers was over. The remaining League defenders, seeing their Leader fall, raised their hands in surrender also, dropping their weapons.

Thorn was bending frantically over the fallen pirate girl.

"Lana!" he cried.

"I'm—not much hurt," the girl stammered, stumbling up with his help. "The side of my suit is scorched. I threw myself aside to avoid the shell, and that's why I fell."

SHE sprang unsteadily forward, and gripped Ool's collar to pull him off the prostrate dictator. But it was too late. The space-dog's great tusks had ripped through Haskell Trask's sult and torn his throat.

Trask looked up at them with pale eyes curiously drained of emotion.

"I—would have ruled the system for —its own good," he murmured. "I would have—" He sighed, and was still.

So a dictator died. . . .

Thorn straightened shakenly. The airlock doors had been closed and oxy-generators were throbbing. And old Stilicho, his helmet off and face still flaming with battle-light, came forcing through the excited pirate throng with another man.

"Found this fellow prisoned in a separate chamber," the old pirate shrilled. "He says he's—"

"Philip Blaine!" Sual Av shouted.

Blaine, greatest of Earth physicists, the man who had built the mysterious mechanism that towered over them!

He was a thin, frail-looking little man, with disheveled gray hair and wide eyes frantic with anxiety.

"Trask made me a prisoner when his force captured the moon!" he babbled. "He tried to make me tell him what my machine is, how it's operated—"

"Blaine, we've brought you the radite that will operate this thing!" John Thorn cried. "But even now the Alliance navies are being cornered inside Mercury by the League fleet. Can you save them with this thing?"

Blaine's eyes flashed. "You've brought the radite? But some of my generators have been damaged!"

The little physicist sprang forward, bending with wild anxiety over the fused generators that had been wrecked by Trask and his men in those last moments.

"Can you repair them in time?" Thorn asked with feverish tensity.

"I can try," Blaine rasped. "I have spare generators in my supply cavern, but it will take time to install them."

"For God's sake, hurry!" Thorn begged. "Gunner, take some men and bring in the radite from the *Venture!*"

Pirates under Thorn's direction hastened to carry in the spare generators from the supply cavern adjoining. Blaine began the task of installing them, the little physicist working alone, none of the hundreds of others in the cavern able to assist him.

Thorn looked up haggardly through the great window in the ceiling, at the blazing sun. Somewhere there in the

(Continued on page 122)

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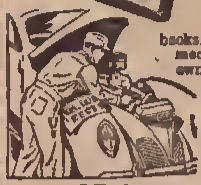

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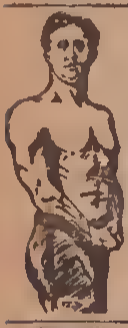

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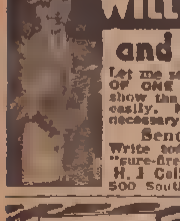

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(Continued from page 120)

burning reaches of space near the flaming orb, the combined navies of Mercury, Venus, Earth and Mars were seeking to elude the League armada bent on their destruction.

Sual Av came running up to where Thorn stood rigidly with Lana.

"John, I got a flesh from Blaine's audio just now!" the Venusian panted. "The League fleet has divided into two forces and is boxing our navies five million miles off Mercury!"

"Can't you hurry, Blaine?" Thorn begged the little scientist desperately.

"I'm—almost through," panted the physicist. He was gasping from exhaustion, as he made his last connections.

"This thing won't save our navies. It *can't* save them!" groaned Gunner Welk. "How can a machine here inside the moon affect a space-battle sixty million miles away?"

"Ready—now," gasped Philip Blaine. "Bring me that radite!"

THE Planeteers hauled forward the asterium-wrapped mass of radite. With tongs, Blaine tore away the protective asterium sheets. The unveiled radite blazed with dazzling white rsdiance, like a solld chunk of the sun.

Blaine rolled it into the injector-hopper of his power-chambers, with the tongs. He slammed down the lid, and then stumbled toward the huge switchboard set in the cavern wall.

"Stand back, all of you!" he panted.

His tremhling hands moved rapidly among the swltches and relays of the panel. And the power-chambers helow the gleaming sphere began to throh with mounting energy.

Louder and louder throbbed the massive chamhers as the radite was disintegrated inside them to produce such concentrated power as had never before been produced in one place. And now the proton-turbines of the great generators were droning loud, adding to the deafening throb of the chambers.

Blaine watched his gauges with feverish eyes, while the Planeteers and their companions stood rigid, watching

"Almost voltage enough," Blaine murmured hoarsely. "Almost—*now!*"

He closed another switch. And then—

Blackness! An utter darkness that enveloped them in a split-second of time, a rayless obscurity such as none of them had ever experienced before.

Thorn looked up bewilderedly, toward where the sun should be blazing down through the ceiling-window. But there was no sunlight now—no light of any kind—nothing but blackness.

"Blaine, what's gone wrong?" he cried hoarsely. "This darkness—"

"Nothing has gone wrong!" shrilled Philip Blaine's thin voice triumphantly. "My neutralizer, my great invention, has succeeded! I knew it would if I had power enough!"

"You mean that it's this machine that has killed all the light here in the cavern?" John Thorn cried.

"It's done more than that!" Blaine exclaimed. "It's killed all light everywhere! *I've blacked out the whole Solar System!*"

A babel of cries of terror rose from the throng in the cavern, above the thunderous throb and drone of the great machine.

"Killed all light in the solar system?" Thorn gasped. "Impossible!"

"The neutralizer has done it, I tell you!" Blaine shrilled exultantly. "It broadcasts a damping wave that neutralizes and kills all vibrations in the electro-magnetic spectrum from three to eight ten-thousandths of a millimeter in wave-length. That includes the whole range of visible light, and the terrific power of this radite-powered generator easts its vibrations out over a radius of eight billion miles, embracing the whole Solar System.

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The stupefied Thorn felt Blaine shove something into his hand. It was a small pair of eye-lenses.

"Put those on!" Blaine's voice came in the darkness.

(Continued on page 124)

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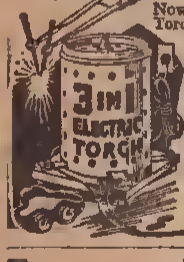

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(Continued from page 123)

John Thorn put the lenses over his eyes. He cried out in amazement. He could see, through the lenses, by a dusky red light that seemed to permeate everything. The sun blazed crimson and weird in the heavens above the glassite window.

Sual Av and Gunner, and Lana and old Stilicho were also staring wildly up through the lenses the little physicist had given them. Blaine himself wore the lenses on his eyes.

"You are seeing by light normally invisible to your retinas, light *above* the wave-length of ordinary light," Blaine told them. "The so-called infra-red vibrations, which are unaffected by my neutralizer, and which are made visible to your eyes by these fluorescent lenses."

"But what good will blacking out the whole solar system do the Alliance navies?" Gunner Welk cried. "The League fleet won't be able to see or maneuver, but neither will our ships!"

"The Alliance ships *will* be able to see!" Blaine retorted. "Each Alliance cruiser has been furnished with a supply of these fluorescent lenses, during the last year. They were given secretly to each cruiser's captain, without telling him anything except he was to use them in case of sudden darkness in space. They'll use them now, there off Mercury, and—"

"And they'll be able to see and to overpower the blinded League ships without a struggle!" Saul Av shouted.

John Thorn's heart bounded with wild, new-born hope. He clutched Lana feverishly to his side.

"If it works!" he prayed. "If it only works!"

They gathered around Blaine's audio. Out of it, as the physicist turned it on, came panic-stricken calls from worlds plunged into absolute darkness, from blinded populations.

The whole system was seething in a turmoil of mad fear. Crowds stumbling blindly through the darkness of lightless streets were screaming that the end of the universe had come. Others were wailing that they had been suddenly stricken with blindness.

An hour passed. The tensity of the group around the audio increased.

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Appalling news of hysterical panic was increasing.

"This can't go on!" Lana exclaimed shakenly. "It's destroying all civilization in the system—"

"Listen!" Thorn cried suddenly.

Out of the audio came a hoarse, familiar voice—the voice of Richard Hoskins, Chairman of Earth.

"Blaine! Philip Blaine!" he was calling. "This is the Chairman! We've won! Commander Lsigh has just audioed me that his Alliance forces off Mercury have captured the whole League armada! Every League ship, its men utterly blinded, was forced to surrender under threat of being destroyed by our own cruisers.

"And I've called authorities on the outer planets. They've agreed to declare the war ended, to terminate Trask's rule and set up popular government again, and to dissolve the League of Cold Worlds into four independent planets again!"

"Trask himself is dead!" John Thorn called back into the instrument.

"You Planeteers are safe?" cried the Chairman's voice. It throbbed with emotion as he added, "I knew you would bring the radite in time, Thorn. I knew you would!"

"Shall I turn off the neutralizer now?" Philip Blaine asked, and the answer came back swiftly.

"Yes! Give the system light again, Blaine!"

THE little physicist leaped to his control-panel. His switches clicked. The droning of the genera-

(Continued on page 126)

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(Continued from page 125)

tors and the throbbing thunder of the power-chambers died.

And suddenly light blazed about them! Not the dusky red infra-red rays by which they had been seeing through the lenses, but brilliant, blessed sunlight pouring through the window in the ceiling.

"We've won!" Sual Av was shouting, his ugly face wild with joy. "The Alliance safe now—the menace of the League gone forever!"

"And that machine did it. That thing in front of us did it!" whispered Gunner Welk, incredulously staring.

Lana's blue eyes were shining as she looked up at Thorn.

"It means the realization of my dream and my father's dream, John. A new independent world built up in the Zone. You'll help me build it?"

He held her close, tears standing in his eyes, unable to speak for the moment in the flood of his emotions.

Then they all stared amazedly at Philip Blaine, who had crumpled down beneath his switch-panel with his face buried in his hands. The little physicist looked up shakenly at them.

"I hope I never have to use the neutralizer to black out the system again!" he said hoarsely. "I felt when it was on that I was trespassing against the command of the One who said, 'Let there be light!'"

CHAPTER XXIII

Epilogue

From Mercury to Pluto,
From Saturn back to Mars—

LUSTILY the old song of the Companions of Space was roaring from hundreds of throats, resounding across the huge sunlit spaceport of great New York. Lana's pirate followers, after being feasted and honored for weeks on Earth, were trooping out to their ships to follow their leader back to the Zone. And that roaring chorus that always before had inspired dread was now greeted by a tremendous cheer from the vast throng gathered around the spaceport.

At the edge of the spaceport stood a little group—the Planeteers, Lana, old Stilicho Keene, and the big space-dog that pressed close to its mistress. Facing them were Richard Hoskins, Chairman of Earth, little Philip Blaine, and grim-faced Commander Leigh. Drawn up to one side were solid ranks of gray-uniformed men of the Earth Navy, an honor-guard of many thousands.

"I don't know what to say to you Planeteers," the Chairman told them unsteadily. "You know what you've done, the whole system knows, and will never forget. But I wish you'd stay here."

John Thorn smiled, his arm around the slender waist of the pirate girl.

"We're going to be needed out there in the Zone, sir," he answered. "It's not going to be so easy to bring law and order to those wild asteroids, even though you've caused all eight plants to recognize the Zone as a ninth independent world."

"Curse me if I like this idea of me sidin' with law and order after all these years," grumbled old Stilicho, his wrinkled face dismayed. "All I know is piracy, and—"

"You'll like it, Stilicho," Lana told him fondly. "We'll need a strong space-police to cover the whole Zone, and it will take plenty of force to subdue some of the outlaw asteroids."

"Plenty of fighting, ye say?" echoed the old Martian. He spat *rial* juice thoughtfully. "Well, mayhe at that it might—"

"Every world in the system will have only friendship for the Zone," the Chairman told them earnestly. "Now that the League is gone forever, and popular government restored on the outer planets, I hope and pray that interplanetary war is over forever."

"And the scientific expedition to Erebus?" John Thorn asked.

"It rockets off next week," the Chairman said, a deep sadness in his eyes. "It carries sufficient cyclotron equipment to hring dissolution and peaceful death to the doomed ones of Erebus."

A hush fell upon them all. And then

(Continued on page 128)

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(Continued from page 127)

the Chairman, his fine face working with emotion, shook their hands in farewell.

Lana started to move away, but Thorn checked her.

"I've a wedding present for you, Lana," he said diffidently. "I had the Chairman re-open the old case of your father's dismissal from the Earth Navy. The investigation was impartial, and showed that in fact Martin Cain was unjustly cashiered from the navy because of the conspiracy of a jealous cabal."

Lana's eyes widened startledly, and clung to Thorn's.

"John, you mean—"

"Listen!" he said.

COMMANDER Leigh had turned and was loudly reading a paper to the solid gray ranks of naval officers and men.

"Order of the Earth Naval Staff, June fourteenth, Twenty-nine-fifty-six: Martin Cain, deceased, is hereby posthumously returned to full rank of captain in the Earth Navy, and his name is ordered inscribed at Headquarters on the roll of officers who have served with honor."

Lana was crying. "My father's name, where he always longed for it to be."

The sixty pirate ships were waiting. They moved out to the *Venture*, and Stilicho climbed inside. But they were all surprised when Gunner Welk drew back from the door.

"I'm not going with you, John," the big Mercurian rumbled. "I didn't know how to tell you all before, but this is good-by."

Thorn was startled. "Gunner, you're not going to separate from us now? Not after you and Sual Av and I have been so long together?"

"What's the matter that you want to break us three up now, Gunner?" Sual Av asked, his ugly face distressed.

Gunner avoided their eyes. He stared off into space with brooding cold blue eyes, his massive countenance queer.

"You're getting married and that changes things," he told Thorn. "It can't help but change things."

His voice deepened. "There were three comrades from different worlds, and they raised a racket from Mercury to Erebus in their time—three Planeteers who did some things that the system won't soon forget. But one of them got married, and that was the end of the Planeteers."

He shrugged heavily. "But I suppose we had to split up some time. Just because three fellows go through hell together with a grin doesn't mean that they have to stay together afterward. I'm wishing you good luck, John, and you, Sual."

Lana stepped forward, and looked up with steady searching blue eyes into the Mercurian's massive, brooding face.

"Gunner, when we fought together and spaced together, I did my part, didn't I?" she asked quietly.

"Of course!" he rumbled. "I'd fight the man who says you're not the staunchest, bravest girl in the system."

"Then John and I marrying isn't going to break up the Planeteers," she told him. "It's going to give you another comrade, that's all. And all four of us together won't be too many for the work of making a civilized world out of the Zone."

Gunner stared at Lana, and slowly his craggy face relaxed. He looked from her to John Thorn.

"Four of us together? And plenty of trouble ahead? Then I stick!"

He turned toward Sual Av, and shoved the grinning Venusian toward the door of the ship.

"What the devil are you hanging back for?" he rumbled. "Don't you know that we're needed out in the Zone—we Four Planeteers!"

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